

Harry Potter and the Year of Discovery

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1. At the Dursleys

Life at the Dursley’s had been better than it had ever been before. Considering what life was like before, this still wasn’t saying much. The main difference between summer now and the summers that had passed before was the fact that the Dursley’s seemed almost terrified of actually speaking to Harry. Also, Harry was no longer expected to keep with Dudley’s diet. This was always a plus. After the threats from Mad-Eye Moody and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix on the train platform at the beginning of summer, Harry was also no longer expected to do chores around the house.

Since the Dursley’s were failing to make life miserable for Harry, he spent a great deal of time in his room alone. This allowed him to make himself miserable. Although, he had managed to complete all of his homework for the summer. Hermione would be proud, and Ron would be horrified. It had now been almost four weeks since the end of term. Harry had to make sure that he sent off a note to Remus or Tonks, once every few days to make sure that they didn’t drop in to make sure that he was alright.

He had received one note from Ron, and two from Hermione thus far in the summer.

Hey Harry,

I hope you aren’t too bored there at the Dursley’s, mate. We only spent two weeks at the Burrow, before we came to headquarters. Mum says Dumbledore told her that you would be able to come the day before your birthday. See you then, mate.

Ron

The letters from Hermione were just a bit more introspective.

Dear Harry,

There are many things going on here right now. Obviously, I can’t tell you about them since the owl might be intercepted. I know that we will have a lot to catch up on when you get to come here to headquarters. I hope to see you soon.

Love

Hermione

Hermione’s second note obviously had to do with nothing other than the O.W.L.’s.

Dear Harry,

I’m going nuts. I want to know what my O.W.L. results are. I’m dying to know how you and Ron did as well. Ron’s being a prat about it. He keeps telling me not to worry, that I did fine. I want my O.W.L. results. I’m sorry to rant at you, Harry, but its sooooo frustrating and I can’t really talk to Ron about it. I’ll see you at headquarters in a couple of weeks.

Love

Hermione

It was only two days after Hermione’s second letter that an unfamiliar owl showed up at Harry’s window. He pulled the letter from the owl’s leg and then allowed the owl to take a drink of water from Hedwig’s cage before it flew out the window. The outside of the letter simply said, O.W.L. results for Harry James Potter. Harry proceeded to open the letter and two sheets fell out. The first was a letter from the O.W.L. board and the second was a list of his scores.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We would like to extend congratulations on your successful testing. You are eligible to take N.E.W.T. level classes in Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Potions, and Transfiguration.

Sincerely,

Griselda Marchbanks

O.W.L. Scores for Harry James Potter

Astronomy A

Care of Magical Creatures O

Charms O

Defense Against the Dark Arts O+

Divination D

Herbology E

History of Magic P

Potions O

Transfiguration E

“Wow”, breathed Harry. “Hermione’s going to be ecstatic.”

The next morning Harry was awakened to the sound of a thump against his window. He opened his eyes to see Pig bouncing around outside. Harry grinned as he opened the window and reached out to grab the tiny owl. He removed the letters from Pig’s leg and then let him fly around excitedly.

He opened the letter from Ron first.

Hey Harry,

Just thought that I would let you know. We will be port keying in to pick you up at noon on the 30th. We got our O.W.L. results yesterday and Hermione is being a pain. She keeps asking me how I did. So far I've refused to tell her. Anyway we'll see you in a few days, mate.

Ron

Then, he opened the letter from Hermione.

Harry,

I got O's in everything but Ancient Runes. I got an E there. I'm so happy. How did you do. Ron's being a prat and won't tell me how he did. I hope you did well. We will see you on the thirtieth.

Love,

Hermione

Harry smiled," I guess I need to send a letter back to them."

Dear Ron,

Stop being a prat. Let Hermione see your scores. You know she's just worried about you. I'll see you on the thirtieth.

Harry

Hermione,

Don't push Ron about his scores. He will tell you when he's good and ready. You will just have to be patient. As far as my scores go, you will have to be patient as well. I'll show them to you as soon as I get to headquarters. Until then, know that I did just fine.

Love,

Harry

P.S. I told Ron he was being a prat, but don't let him know that I told you that.

Harry spent the next few days in his new favorite pastime. Voldemort watching. With all the time Harry had to spend alone in his room during the summer, he spent a lot of time thinking and focusing. While doing this he discovered the true nature of his connection to Tom Riddle. It worked both ways. He could peer into the depths of Voldemort's mind. At this point, Harry knew everything that Tom Riddle had done to become Lord Voldemort. More importantly, he knew how to undo it. Also, he knew Voldemort's plans which he had been owling to Dumbledore for the last four weeks. He also had access to Voldemort's memories from school. Harry had a feeling that it was going to be a very interesting year at Hogwarts.

On the morning of the thirtieth, Harry went down to breakfast. He looked at his Uncle Vernon with trepidation as he realized he needed to interrupt him.

"Er.. Uncle Vernon?"

"What, boy?" barked Vernon.

"I needed to let you know that the Weasley's are coming to get me today at noon." replied Harry. Petunia broke in almost fearfully, "They aren't going to tear up the living room, are they?"

Harry almost smiled at her discomfort, "No, they are going to be using a portkey, not the floo."

"Is anyone going to see them?" asked Vernon.

"No, they will be coming directly into the house, and then we will be going directly from my room I suppose." Harry said.

"Very well," grumbled Vernon, "as long as they don't stay."

Harry actually grinned as he finished the last of his breakfast, "Well, I've got to go and finish packing. Bye then."

Then, Harry ran up the stairs to his room. The remark that he needed to finish packing was just an excuse. Harry had finished the night before. So, all he had to do was sit and wait for whoever was coming to arrive.

At precisely noon, there was a pop and suddenly Tonks and Ron appeared in the room. Tonks smiled sunnily, "Wotcher. Harry, how are you?"

Harry smiled. "I'm fine, Tonks. Nice hair."

Tonks grinned cheekily since her hair was a nice shade of neon green at the moment. Ron broke in, "It's good to see you, mate."

Harry grinned back, "You bet it is."

Tonks asked, "So, Harry, are all of your things ready to go?"

"Yes, they are all in my trunk. I've already told the Dursleys that I was leaving, so we can go whenever you are ready." replied Harry.

"Alright then, you and Ron grab the trunk and latch a finger on." At this she slipped out a piece of wood. Ron and Harry each grabbed one handle of the trunk, and then put a finger on the portkey. Then, Tonks tapped it three times with her wand, and they were gone.

2. To Headquarters

With the same pop that they left the Dursleys with, Ron, Harry, and Tonks appeared at #12 Grimmauld Place. Before Harry even managed to take a breath he was swept up into a hug by Mrs. Weasley. “Oh, Harry, we’re so glad that you’re finally here. Why don’t you and Ron go upstairs and put your trunk away, and then come down and have some lunch. Dumbledore wants to speak with you, Harry.”

“Is he here now?” questioned Harry.

“Yes, dear, he’s in the kitchen waiting for you.” Molly replied.

Harry immediately began dragging his trunk up the stairs, with Ron fighting to keep up. They reached Ron and Harry’s room and put his trunk at the foot of his bed. They turned around to run smack into Hermione. Hermione squealed and grabbed Harry in a hug. Harry responded by enveloping Hermione in a hug and placing a kiss on her cheek. “Hey, Mione. C’mon, let’s go talk to Proffessor Dumbledore.”

“O.K., but after that I want to know about your O.W.L.’s.” replied Hermione.

“I know, I know. Let’s go.” With that the three teenagers raced down the stairs to the kitchen where they found Mrs. Weasley, Dumbledore, Tonks, and Ginny.

“Ah, Harry, just the wizard I’ve been waiting for.” said Albus.

“What did you need to see me about, sir?” asked Harry.

“Well, Harry, its about Sirius. He named you to be his sole heir in his will.” replied Albus.

Harry frowned, “I don’t really want to talk about this, Professor. Can it wait?”

“Most of it, yes. However, I would like to at least outline what is now yours, if I may?” Harry nodded for him to continue. “Yes, well, the Black estate comprises several thousand galleons that have now been transferred to your vault. Also, this residence is now yours. I am for the time being the executor of Sirius’ last will and testament which means that I will hold the deeds for the home until you become of age, Harry.”

Harry nodded numbly, “Is that all?”

“Yes, Harry, that is everything. Now, I assume that you would like to be filled in on what has been happening up until now over the summer. However, I must ask that you hold your questions until tonight at dinner when I will return with some other members of the Order. I will speak to you then. For now I must be going. Good-bye, Harry, Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley, Molly. I will see you all at dinner.”

“Good-bye, Professor.” chorused the students. “Good-bye, Albus” added Molly.

Then with a pop the headmaster was gone.

“Well, I think its time to eat.” announced Molly as she began to sit trays of sandwiches on the table.

Hermione sat there almost hopping with anticipation as the five of them settled down to eat. Harry looked over at Ginny, and nodded his head toward Hermione and rolled his eyes. Ginny laughed.

“Go, ahead and ask, Hermione.” intoned Harry.

“How did you do on your O.W.L.’s?” quizzed Hermione.

Harry soundlessly pulled out the folded piece of paper and handed it over to Hermione. She opened and read down the page and then handed the paper to Ginny and Mrs. Weasley. Then, she jumped up and rounded the table and grabbed Harry in another massive hug. Harry then proceeded to kiss her on the cheek again, to which Ron flushed red, but no one besides Harry noticed. “Harry,” she squealed, “Those scores are amazing, although you could have done better on History of Magic I suppose. Now, Ron, you see, it can be done. You don’t have any excuse for not pushing yourself to do better on your N.E.W.T.’s than you did on your O.W.L.’s.”

Ron interrupted her, “Mione, give it a break.”

“Yeah, come on, leave him alone.” broke in Harry. “By the way how did you do?”

Ron grimaced, “I got P’s in Divination, History of Magic, and Potions. A’s in Transfiguration, Astronomy, Charms, and Care of Magical Creatures. I got an E in Herbology, and an O in Defense against the Dark Arts.”

Harry grinned, “Not bad, mate, so which ones are you going to do at N.E.W.T.?”

“The obvious, I suppose, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Herbology, and DADA. No more Snape.” cheered Ron.

“Speak for yourself,” grinned Harry, “I’ve got two more years with him.”

Ron gasped, “You mean you’re not dropping potions?”

Harry grimaced at the look of horror on Ron’s face, “I can’t. I want to be an Auror and you have to have an N.E.W.T. in Potions.”

Ron’s face fell, “Yeah, I guess you’re right. It would have been cool to be able to become an Auror, but I couldn’t make the cut.”

Hermione broke in, “You could have, though. All you had to do was pay closer attention in class and study more. You would have been able to do it easily. Harry got an O in Potions, and Snape’s meaner to him than anyone else.”

Ron made a smart retort, which set Hermione off even more and the two launched into a full blown argument. Harry managed to catch Ginny’s eye, and motioned his head toward the living room. He got up and she followed him. They sat down on the couch and Ginny asked, “Have they always been like this?”

Harry sighed, “You better believe it.”

Ginny smiled and then turned sober, “Harry, why did you kiss Hermione on the cheek. Ron didn’t appear to like it very much when you did it.”

Harry laughed, “I thought I was the only one that noticed. I was trying to make him jealous.”

“Why”

“I’m tired of those two fighting all the time.”

Ginny giggled, “I can understand that, but how is making Ron jealous going to make the two of them stop fighting?”

Harry looked at her, “Come on, Ginny, you know the only reason that the two of them fight all the time is because they like each other.”

Ginny nodded, “I knew that, I just didn’t know any of you boys had figured it out.”

“Ginny, just because your brother is a little slow when it comes to Hermione, doesn’t mean that the rest of us are. Hell, I would bet several galleons on the fact that Draco Malfoy knows that the two of them like each other. He just doesn’t give a damn.”

Ginny giggled even harder, “The only two people who don’t know how the other one feels are the two of them.”

Harry nodded, “I know, and that’s exactly what I plan to change, because I am not living through another year of those two rowing constantly. It’s enough to drive anyone batty, and I already have enough mental problems.”

Ginny looked puzzled. “Harry, you don’t have any mental problems.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, “I don’t. I share brains with Voldemort. If that’s not a mental problem, then I don’t know what would qualify.”

Ginny giggled even harder, “I guess I see your point.”

Harry shook his head, “That’s enough about my mental problems, we were discussing relationships, so what’s your story?”

Ginny frowned, “What do you mean?”

“The last time I heard you were dating Gryffindor Tower’s resident West Ham soccer fan, Mr. Dean Thomas. So, how is that going?”

Ginny blushed, “Oh, well Dean and I broke up a few weeks ago.”

“So, who’s the lucky guy, now?”

Ginny blushed even harder, “No one, I’m single again.”

Harry sighed, “Shocking, I didn’t realize there were enough idiots at Hogwarts to even give you a shot at staying single. They must all be stupid or blind. Either that or you’re being picky. Which is it?”

This statement only managed to increase Ginny’s blush, to which Harry said, “You know, that shade of red really is quite fetching on you, Ginny. I shall have to see if we can’t introduce it on a more permanent basis.”

At this Ginny fled from the room up the stairs, which occurred at about the same moment that Ron and Hermione walked into the sitting room. Hermione looked expectantly at Harry, while Ron burst out, “What happened?”

Harry grinned, “If I’m not mistaken, I think I embarrassed her. Hermione, would you go check on her, and make sure that I didn’t make her mad.”

Hermione nodded and followed Ginny’s path up the stairs, although at a much slower pace. Ron grinned, “Wizard’s chess?”

Harry returned the grin, “Definitely.”

When Hermione got to Ginny’s room, she heard what almost sounded like laughter. “Ginny, are you O.K.?”

“I’m better than O.K., Hermione. Unless I’m completely losing my mind, Harry was flirting with me. Actually flirting with me.”

Hermione smiled, “Well, if he is, it would be about time. He has been somewhat of a prat when it comes to you over the years.”

Ginny grinned mischievously, “Oh, like you’re one to talk. You and Ron have had crushes on each other for awhile now and neither of you have done anything about it.”

Hermione looked scandalized, “I don’t like your brother. He makes me so mad. If he would just study, and put some effort into his studies, then he might be tolerable, but …”

At this Ginny had broken down completely, and laughed at Hermione. “What is so funny, Ginny?”

Ginny continued laughing and managed to choke out, “You, Harry doesn’t do his work or study like he should most of the time, but I don’t see you having a fit about him the way you do about Ron. It’s because you like him, Hermione, and you know it.”

Hermione turned beet red, “Well, maybe, but he’s still a prat.”

Ginny smiled, “I know that, but the only reason he acts that way is because he doesn’t know how to tell you that he likes you. Heck, sometimes, I even wonder if he actually knows himself? Harry seems to think that he doesn’t realize his feelings.”

“What does Harry have to do with anything?”

“Oh, come on, Hermione, when has Harry ever kissed you on the cheek before? He’s only doing it to try and make Ron jealous. You should have seen the look on Ron’s face when Harry pecked you on the cheek at the table. His face was redder than his hair.”

“Really, I didn’t think that he would be that obvious. How does Harry know that we like each other anyway.”

Ginny really laughed at that, “Are you kidding, Harry told me he figured that even Draco Malfoy knew that the two of you liked each other. He said it has been obvious for a long time to everyone in Gryffindor.”

Hermione looked at Ginny in amazement, “Harry said that. He’s more perceptive than I thought. I’m going to have to start being more careful about what I say in front of him from now on.”

After a couple of very humiliating losses to Ron, Harry decided that he had had enough wizard’s chess for the day. “I’m going to go upstairs and see what the girls are up to. I need to check on Hermione anyway.”

Ron flushed mildly red, but was cut off from making any kind of retort by a call from the kitchen, “Ron Weasley, get in here this instant,” screamed Mrs. Weasley.

Harry grinned cheekily at Ron and said, “See ya later.” He then proceeded up the stairs to the girl’s room, and stepped to the doorway just as Hermione was telling Ginny she would have to be more careful about what she said in front of Harry. He broke in, “You’re also going to have to be considerably more careful of what you say about me when I happen to be lurking in the doorway.” Both girls jumped in surprise at his voice coming from the doorway. Harry walked in smiling cheekily, “Surprise.”

Ginny stood up, “Harry Potter, that was not funny. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Harry looked at her over the rims of his glasses, “Yes, it was. Also, I would like to know exactly why you need to be more careful about what you say in front of me?”

Ginny smiled, “We were talking about what you and I discussed earlier. Hermione said she didn’t realize that you were so perceptive.”

“Ginny.” moaned Hermione.

Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione, “Now, Hermione, I couldn’t have spent the years I have around you and not learned to pick up on something. Who do you think I am, Ron.”

Hermione blushed, “No, of course not, but you usually don’t seem to pay attention to things like that.”

Harry smiled cryptically and flicked his eyes at Ginny but only Hermione saw it, “Appearances can be deceiving, Hermione.”

Hermione smiled impishly back at him, “I can see that.”

Harry flushed, “Yeah well, let’s just keep that between the two of us for the time being.” He stared pointedly at Hermione until she nodded.

Ginny asked, “What did I just miss?”

Harry smiled, “Ask me that question later. I’ll think about answering it. Back to the original conversation. I left Ron stewing downstairs.”

Ginny grinned mischievously, “Exactly how did you do that?”

“Well, I told him that I was coming upstairs to check on Hermione.”

Hermione looked horrified, “You didn’t!”

Harry nodded, “I most certainly did. If he doesn’t take the hint and react pretty soon, I’m going to go to more drastic measures.”

“What do you mean by more drastic measures?” asked Hermione.

Harry shook his head, “I’m going to have to start telling you how beautiful you are, and I might even have to start holding your hand.”

Hermione looked scandalized, “Well, you don’t have to act like it would kill you to say something nice about me.”

Harry laughed, “Mione, I don’t mind saying good stuff about you because it’s true. I just think that it’s pitiful that I’m going to have to go this far to make that goofball pay attention.”

Ginny shrugged, “You don’t really have to. You could just talk to him about it.”

Harry snorted, “Do you know your brother? If I tried to talk to him about this, he would deny it at the top of his lungs, and then go out of his way to avoid Hermione just to prove a point.”

Ginny held up her hands, “Okay, I get the picture. You’re right. I just hope that he doesn’t end up attacking you or something.”

Harry grinned, “If he doesn’t, I will be very highly disappointed. Don’t worry about it though, I’ll be bringing it on myself, so I don’t intend to get mad about it. Although, you had better talk him down quickly after he does it. I don’t want to have to hurt him.”

Hermione snorted, “What makes you think that you could hurt him?”

Harry just smiled mysteriously, “Let’s just say that I have been studying quite a bit over the summer. I know a few curses that I don’t think that he could handle.”

Hermione looked amazed, “You’ve been studying when you don’t have to?”

Harry replied, “In more ways than one.”

At that point Ron walked into the room. “So, what’s going on in here?”

“Nothing, Ron, we were just talking about studying.” replied Harry sunnily.

Hermione spoke up, “So when’s dinner?”

Harry laughed, “I thought Ron was usually the one worried about food.”

Hermione and Ginny giggled at the look on Ron’s face. “I am not always worried about food, Harry.”

Harry chortled, “Don’t give me that. I’m surprised you don’t chew someone’s arm off when they pass you the potatoes.”

Hermione and Ginny fell over laughing at this joke with Harry not far behind. Even Ron laughed. “Dinner will be about sevenish, so we have a couple of hours.”

Harry stood up, “Good, I think that I will go spend a little while meditating.”

Hermione shot up from the floor, “Meditating?”

“Yeah, it helps me focus. Dumbledore will be here to discuss some things at dinner this evening, and I intend to be mentally prepared for anything that he needs to tell me. I think there is going to be an Order meeting afterward, and I intend to be a part of it, so I need to think and plan my argument for why I need to be included. I would appreciate it if no one disturbed me until dinner time.”

Each of the others nodded as Harry walked out the door, but they also exchanged odd glances that Harry saw. After he had walked from the room Harry grinned wryly to himself and thought I guess I’m going to be the topic of conversation for awhile. Then, he proceeded into his room and settled down onto the bed. Once he had arranged himself into a cross legged position he smiled almost hungrily, “Well, Tom, let’s see what you have on your mind this tonight.” Next, Harry concentrated on the connection that was maintained between himself and Voldemort. As soon as Harry entered Voldemort’s mind, he realized that Voldemort was upset to say the least. Harry deepened his concentration so that he could actually see and hear what was going on. Voldemort was in a small chamber with walls made of stone. There were no windows and only one door. The only other occupant of the room was a Death Eater that was kneeling prostrate before the Dark Lord, who was pacing to and fro in obvious agitation.

Finally after what seemed like an eternity to Harry, but was probably only a few seconds, Voldemort spoke, “Bella, I am disappointed. I want to know how the Aurors knew that we were going to attempt to raid the Minister’s home. They should have never expected such a move by us.”

Bella responded meekly, “My Lord, I fear that you have been betrayed. That is the only way they could have known. There must be a spy among our ranks.”

Voldemort mused, “That I believe is obvious, Bella. I want to know who.”

Bella replied, “I know, My Lord, and it will only be a matter of time before I discover them. I promise.”

Voldemort smiled evilly, “I know you will not fail me, Bella. However, this blunder shall not go unpunished. Send in Bridges as you leave. Also, convey my pleasure to your husband for his successful raid on Azkaban. As soon as he arrives, have Lucius come to me. You may go.”

Bella rose, “Yes, My Lord.”

Once she had left the room, another Death Eater stepped in and was immediately subjected to the Cruciatus Curse. Harry could see him thrashing on the ground and hear his screaming. However, even over that he could hear Voldemort’s maniacal laughter. So, Harry relaxed the connection and busied himself rummaging through Voldemort’s memories and knowledge for useful spells and techniques. Even after having a month of practice of sorting through Voldemort’s mind it still amazed Harry that when he learned something through the connection it was as if he had learned it in class and spent a thousand hours practicing the spell. Everything that he gained through the connection was simple for him to perform. He had discovered a way to mask his magical signature early on, and had actually been able to practice spells in his room at Privet Drive. Harry smiled with the knowledge that he would have a few surprises for any of the Death Eaters that confronted him this year. He had learned to Apparate and was actually quite proficient at it. He had also learned many useful spells that were going to be a lot of fun springing on the teachers this year.

It was almost time for dinner, and Ginny decided to go upstairs and see if Harry realized what time it was. Ron and Hermione were sitting on the couch talking. They were starting to bore her. Hermione had broken down and told Ron that she liked him just to keep Harry from doing anything too drastic to make Ron wise up. Ron had been sitting there looking stupid ever since. As Ginny walked into Ron and Harry’s room, she saw something that she never expected to see. Harry was hovering several inches above his bedspread with his legs crossed. Ginny rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn’t seeing things. She wasn’t. “Harry?” she squeaked. Within a second Harry had sprang from the bed and had his wand out pointed at her. When he saw who it was he smiled and said, “Hi, Ginny.”

“You were floating!”

Harry smirked, “Yeah, I know.”

Ginny spread her hands, “So, are you going to tell me how you were floating?”

“Not right now. Ask me again later and maybe I’ll explain it. Right now, I’m starved and I can smell your mother’s meatloaf. So, let’s go to dinner.”

“Harry James Potter, why do you keep telling me to ask you later?”

Harry smiled, “Why not? It gives me an excuse to talk to you later.”

Ginny looked at him oddly, “Harry, you don’t need an excuse to talk to me. All you have to do is say hi.”

Harry nodded, “I know. I just enjoy making excuses to talk to you. Now let’s go to dinner.” Harry walked out the door and then realized that Ginny didn’t follow him. So, he turned around and stuck his head back in the door. “Are you coming?” he asked as he held out his hand to her. That was all it took as she grabbed his hand and the two of them made their way down the stairs to the kitchen.

3. Dinner and the Order

Ginny and Harry walked into the kitchen and received several amused, and altogether surprised looks. Hermione smiled when she saw them, and Ron raised his eyebrows at Harry. Harry looked confused for a moment until he happened to glance down and see that he was still holding Ginny’s hand. He flushed slightly red, and took his hand away from her. Ginny looked sad for a moment until she caught Harry’s eye and he smiled at her. Harry then went and sat down by Dumbledore who had been observing the two teenagers with his customary twinkle in his eye. “Professor, did you know that Lucius Malfoy and the others have escaped from Azkaban?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore, Bill, Molly, Arthur, and Remus all looked at Harry in astonishment. Albus replied, “Yes, Harry, we just found out earlier this afternoon. The question is, how did you know?”

Harry smiled, “I have my ways. Also, what happened at the Minister’s house? Was anyone hurt?”

Harry was again the recipient of several amazed expressions as Albus answered, “No, Harry there were no major injuries and the Aurors managed to catch two Death Eaters.”

Harry smirked, “So, that’s why old Tom is in such a fume.”

Dumbledore frowned, “What do you mean, Harry?”

Harry tapped his scar, “Professor, you know that I can read Voldemort’s emotions through my scar. I have actually gotten a little better at it since he possessed me at the Ministry that night.”

“What do you mean that you have gotten better at it?” broke in Lupin.

“Exactly that. I don’t have to deal with any pain from the reading. Also, I can shut it off.”

Dumbledore smiled, “So, you’ve learned to control it. Now, you don’t have to worry about him sending you visions.”

“I don’t know about that, Professor. I can shut it off after I start getting images or feelings through the scar, but I can’t stop them from starting. So, if he showed me something, then I might watch it to try and determine if it was real, but I still wouldn’t be able to necessarily tell the difference between fantasy and reality.” stated Harry.

Arthur leaned forward, “It’s a start though. It’s progress.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Indeed, Arthur, it is most definitely progress. Well, Harry it appears that I don’t have much to tell you.” he broke off as Molly set dinner on the table and everyone began to tuck in. He continued once everyone had their food, “There have been three major attacks while you were out of contact. The attempt at the Minister’s home. We were prepared for that one. The raid on Azkaban. We expected that but since the Dementors are still in control there was little that we could do. The other was from the Giants. They attacked a contingent of Aurors that were hunting for them in the mountains. Luckily, no one was killed, but the giants got away again. There have been a few homes raided and destroyed, but thankfully no one has been killed yet. So, it seems that you already knew most of what I came here to tell you tonight.”

Harry nodded, “Perhaps.” At that moment Kingsley and Tonks came out of the fireplace.

Molly stood up and began fussing. “Alright, children, hurry up and finish your dinner. The rest of the Order will be arriving soon and we will need the kitchen for the meeting.” After this statement Hermione, Ginny, and Ron looked expectantly at Harry, but he merely shook his head and continued eating. By the time the four teenagers were finished with their food, Mundungus Fletcher, Snape, McGonagall, and Mad-Eye had arrived. Molly began to shoo Ron, Hermione, and Ginny out the door when she noticed that Harry had not gotten up. “Harry, dear, come on we need to get the meeting started.”

Harry merely shook his head, “I will not be leaving the room. I intend to remain for the meeting. I will join the Order of the Phoenix.”

“That’s just perfect, Potter. You’re as arrogant as your father.” snapped Snape. What happened after these words occurred so quickly that most of the people in the room didn’t even see it. Harry leaped from his seat at the table and spun around to smash his fist into Snape’s face with all the force that he could muster. By the time that Snape actually hit the ground, Harry’s wand was in his hand and leveled at Snape’s nose.

“If you ever insult my father again, Severus, I will curse you so horribly that they will never be able to let you out of St. Mungo’s. Do I make myself clear?” The menace dripping from Harry’s voice surprised everyone in the room. Snape was so shocked at what had occurred that he could do little more than nod meekly. Harry returned his wand to his robe and then turned to the rest of them, “As I was saying before I was interrupted, I intend to join the Order of the Phoenix.”

Molly couldn’t contain herself any longer, “Harry, you’re not an adult, yet. It’s not your place to join in the fighting. We are supposed to be protecting you. You need to stay at school and just be a kid.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, Molly, Harry is right. It is time for him to join the Order.”

Molly looked positively livid, “Albus, you can’t be serious. He is just a child. He’s not ready for anything like this.”

Harry slammed one of his fists down into the table, “Molly, I am not a child, and you can’t protect me anymore. This is my battle, just as it is everyone else’s in this room.”

“Oh, Harry, be serious. You aren’t old enough. The Order is for adults that know how to handle themselves in situations that require courage and quick thinking.”

Harry looked revolted at what Molly had just said to him, “How dare you say that to me. When was the last time you dualed with Voldemort?” Everyone in the room flinched at the name except Lupin, Moody, and Dumbledore. “I’m not old enough to deal with situations that require courage, but you can’t even stand to hear his name spoken. Where is the courage that you just spoke of. Voldemort! Voldemort!” The room flinched again. “It’s a name. Nothing more. It has no power to do anything to you. I spoke it. Hell, I’ll even insult the bastard. Voldemort is a sod. As you can see, I wasn’t struck by lightning. I did not fall over dead. Hell, I didn’t even get a runny nose. Exactly what is there to be afraid of from a name. Molly, I know you just want to keep me safe, but that’s not something that any of you can do. I’m going to face Voldemort in battle again. I’m going to kill him. And guess what, there is absolutely nothing that any of you can do to change that fact.”

By this point most of the men in the room were looking at their feet. Molly, Hermione, and Ginny were crying. Tonks was sniffing while leaning on Remus’ shoulder.

Remus cleared his throat, “Well, I believe that we have business to attend to. Molly, if you would lead those three out and charm the door. We can get to work.”

Molly proceeded to lead the three of them out and then cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door. The three teenagers walked up the stairs not quite believing what they had just seen.

Dumbledore stood, “I believe that our first order of business is to welcome a Potter back into the Order. Next, I believe, we need to hear a report from Severus.”

By this time Severus had cleaned up his face. “The only thing that I really have to report is that Lucius Malfoy is going to be sent in an attack on Potter. He is to be given this task to make up for his blunder in the Department of Mysteries. Their aim is not to kill him, but to kill one of his friends and hopefully capture him in the process. The Dark Lord has become somewhat obsessed with the idea of catching Potter.”

Harry muttered, “So, that’s what he wanted him for.”

Albus leaned over, “Sorry, what was that, Harry?”

“My apologies, Professor. I was just commenting that that was why Voldemort was sending for Lucius earlier.”

McGonagall questioned, “Mr. Potter, exactly how do you know that You-Know-Who sent for Lucius?”

Harry looked puzzled for a moment, “Oh, sorry. I meant to tell all of you this immediately, but I got caught up in my argument. Earlier I said that I was gaining control of my connection with Voldemort. Well, that was the understatement of the century. This can’t go any farther than this room. I don’t even wish for it to be common knowledge among the Order. I’ve learned that the connection goes both ways. I can send visions to Voldemort. It also means that he can home in on my thoughts and what I am seeing, just like I can to him.”

Lupin spoke up, “Isn’t that dangerous for us, right now. I mean, he could be watching through your eyes.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I can keep him blocked off as long as I’m paying attention. It takes too much effort for me to do it all the time, but for now we’re safe from his prying eyes. I have to be very careful to keep any dangerous knowledge hidden deep in my mind so that he can’t find it before I realize he’s in my head.”

Mad-Eye broke in this time, “Does he know that you can peek into what he’s doing?”

“Yes and no. He knows that sometimes I get glimpses of what he is doing from the scar. He’s known that since the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He doesn’t know that I can consciously control it though. He knows that I have discovered how to block him off, though. He tried to invade my mind a few weeks back to find out things and I shut him off. However, he thinks that it is because of my Occlumency training, and not because I have gained control of the connection between us.”

Kingsley leaned in, “So you’re saying that you can spy on him without him knowing it.”

“Yes, and again no. I can, but I can’t stay active in his mind for long. If I do, then he will realize that my mind is present, and then he can block me off. So, I basically just have to take a short peek. If I stay he might realize that I have learned to control the connection. That would be bad. Also, speaking of spies. Professor Snape, I caught a conversation earlier between Bellatrix and Voldemort. They suspect a spy among the Death Eaters. They don’t know its you yet, but they will be watching anyone they even slightly suspect, and you know that you are going to be at the top of that list considering you didn’t show up that night in the graveyard.”

Snape nodded coldly but refrained from making any snide remarks.

Molly finally spoke, “Okay this is enough to absorb for one night, but I want to know what you meant by the fact you said you were going to kill You-Know-Who, Harry?”

Harry sighed, “So, Professor, I take it they don’t know about the Prophecy.”

“They know it exists, Harry. They don’t know what it says. However, I believe that it is time for the Order to know what it entails.”

Bill rubbed his hands together as Dumbledore drew out his Pensieve, “Finally.”

Harry looked across the table at him, “You will wish like hell that you hadn’t said that after you hear it.” Bill’s eyes widened at the expression on Harry’s face when he said that.

Dumbledore proceeded to remove the memory from his head, and place it into the Pensieve. He then tapped his wand to it and the ghostly image of a young woman rose and began to speak

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT ... AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

The ghostly figure sank back down into the Pensieve. One could have heard a pin drop in the silence that filled the room. Arthur stood up, "I, for one, have heard more than I can process in a single night. I think that we should call it a night."

The others nodded mutely as Harry stood up and began walking towards the door. He didn't quite make it before Molly Weasley had swept him up into one of her bone-crushing hugs. "Oh, Harry" she sobbed.

Harry surprised her by returning the hug just as fiercely as she gave it. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley. You have been more like a mother to me than I ever could have hoped for. It has to be this way, though. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

"I know, Harry, I know, but I don't have to like it." Harry nodded as the two broke the hug and he again headed for the door. Molly stopped him with her voice this time, "Harry." He turned around to face her. "I would prefer it if you called me, Molly."

Harry smiled, "Yes, Molly, I'm going to go up and go to bed."

Harry climbed the stairs with trepidation, because he knew what was going to happen once Ron, Hermione, and Ginny found out the meeting was over.

When Harry got to the door of his and Ron's room, he sighed as he heard the babble of voices that was coming from inside. It seemed almost as if all three of them were trying to talk at once. Harry steeled himself at the barrage of questions that were about to be thrown at him and stepped into the room.

"Harry, what is going on? What happened in the meeting?"

"I can't believe you did that to Snape. He could have hurt you."

"That was awesome, mate. I just wish that we had gotten a picture."

Harry held up his hands to stem the flow of questions and statements. "One at a time. One at a time. First, what happened in the meeting stays there. Second, Snape didn't have a prayer of hurting me. Third, no, it wasn't awesome. If Snape wasn't such a prat all the time it would never have happened. Anything else?"

Hermione looked stunned, "Are you telling us that you aren't going to reveal what happens in the Order meetings?"

"Yes, Hermione, that is exactly what I'm telling you. I will tell you anything that I feel you absolutely need to know, but beyond that it is Order business."

Ron looked stunned, "We deserve to be kept in the loop, Harry. You can't shut us out!"

Harry shook his head, "I'm not trying to shut you out. Anything major happens, and I promise the three of you will find out about it. Everything else, and its safer if you don't know."

Ginny asked, "What do you mean safer?"

"Do the three of you not get it. After what happened at the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort will do anything in the world to lay hands on one of you. He knows that if he gets you that he has me. Its safer for you to know less because that means he can't get anything out of you if he captures you. We need every advantage we can get."

Ron looked sullen, "Then, why do you get to be in on everything. What makes you so special?"

"You do deserve an answer to that. Remember the Prophecy that we broke." All three of them nodded. "Well, I know what it says. I'm not going to tell you exactly what it involves, because that is the last thing that Voldemort needs to get his hands on. However, let's just say that the Prophecy makes it impossible for the Order to keep me out of things. I no longer have a choice in the matter. The three of you do. If you can stay out of danger, then you are going to."

Ginny huffed, "We want to help, though."

Harry held up his hands to forestall any further objections, "I know that you want to help. When I need your help, I promise I will ask. When it becomes necessary for you to know something, I will tell you. Until then I'm afraid that it has to be this way. I just hope that you all understand."

Ginny stood up and walked over to him, "I understand, Harry. Anytime you need me though, I'm here."

Harry smiled, "Thank you, Ginny." He turned to the other two. Hermione and Ron stood up and walked out without even looking at Harry. Harry sighed, "I hope they come around."

Ginny patted him on the shoulder, "They will, don't worry. I'm going to go to bed. Goodnight, Harry."

Harry smiled wanly, "Goodnight, Ginny. Thanks again."

Ginny smiled as she walked from the room. Harry laid down on his bed and fell asleep within moments.

4. Time at Grimmauld Place

The next morning Harry awoke refreshed and ready for another day. He looked over to see Ron still asleep in his bed. He quickly got up and went for the shower. Once he finished he got dressed and headed down to breakfast.

“Good morning, Harry, dear.” greeted Mrs. Weasley as he walked into the kitchen. Hermione was in the kitchen, but when she looked up and saw Harry, she got up and walked out without speaking. Harry sighed. “What’s the matter, Harry?”

“Ron and Hermione are mad at me because I won’t tell them what happened in the Order meeting last night.”

Mrs. Weasley whirled around to look at Harry, “You didn’t tell them.”

“No, Molly, I didn’t. I’m going to eventually, but I’m just not ready for them to know what the Prophecy says. I can’t tell them what’s going on with the Order without telling them the details of the Prophecy. I know what their reactions are going to be. I’m just not ready to face that, yet.” Harry replied.

Molly smiled at him, “I understand, and they will too, eventually.” She put a plate of eggs and sausage in front of him, “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Harry snorted, “I can’t believe I forgot my own birthday.”

Ginny walked in, “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Harry looked up smiling, “Thank you, Ginny.”

Ginny sat down beside Harry after grabbing a plate, and began to eat. Then, Ron walked into the kitchen and grabbed food. He then turned around and walked out to go eat with Hermione. Harry shook his head, “This is going to be a long summer.”

Ginny patted him on the shoulder, again, “Don’t worry, they won’t stay mad at you forever.”

Molly broke in, “Ginny’s right, dear, they will come around.”

Harry nodded, “I know, but I think I’m going to go up to my room, and meditate some more. I’ll see you at lunch.”

After Harry had left the room, Ginny turned to her mother, “Mum, why does everything have to happen to him? Why can’t he just relax and be normal?”

Mrs. Weasley shook her head sadly, “I don’t know, dear, but I do know that he is the bravest young man I have ever known.”

Harry walked into his room upstairs, and locked the door behind him. “Okay, Voldemort, let’s see what I can dig out of your mind this morning.” Harry sat on his bed and arranged his legs and began to focus. He entered Voldemort’s mind fluidly and easily. While maneuvering his way through Voldemort’s subconscious he came across something that he had never seen before. Voldemort’s Animagus form. He concentrated on the form, and discovered that Voldemort was a raven. A little more digging and Harry uncovered the training to become an Animagus. He began the equivalent of downloading the information into his brain.

Suddenly, there was a knocking on his door. Harry shook himself from the connection. “Who is it?”

“Harry, its Ginny. Did you know that it was lunchtime?” Harry glanced at the clock beside his bed and noticed that it was after noon. He jumped up to go and open the door.

“Hi, sorry, I must have zoned out in there. Let’s go eat.”

Ginny smiled, “Okay, but can I talk to you later?”

Harry smiled, “Of course. I always have time to talk to you.”

Ginny blushed scarlet and led the way down to the kitchen.

When the two of them entered, Ron and Hermione got up and left. Ginny acted like she was about to say something to them, but Harry placed a hand on her arm and shook his head. “Anything that you say to them, will just make the situation worse. It’s best just to leave them be for awhile.” Harry grinned mischievously, “In fact, its probably a good thing that they aren’t talking to me.”

Ginny looked at him in amazement, “How can you say that?”

“If neither of them can come to me to complain about the other one then they have to talk to each other. If they finally stop bickering and start going out, any loneliness I go through will have been worth it.”

“I’m not going to let you be lonely, Harry.” Ginny said.

Harry grinned in reply, “I know, but its not the same. I like talking to you, Ginny, but Ron and Hermione have been close to me for a lot longer. I’m more comfortable around them than I am you. Although, I have a feeling that sentiment is going to change.”

Ginny blushed, “Well, I…” She stopped when Harry placed a finger on her lips. Then, he bolted for the door to see Arthur and Remus help a limping Bill into the foyer.

“What happened?” asked Harry.

“The Death Eaters attacked the Minister’s home again. We were sent by Dumbledore to check on the aftermath. One of the Death Eaters that we thought was stunned jumped up and hit Bill with a curse. He’s okay, but the medi-witch said that he would be limping for a day or so.” answered Lupin as he and Arthur helped Bill to the couch. By this time the rest of the household had ran into the sitting room.

“Were there any casualties?” asked Harry.

Lupin nodded as Molly began to fuss over Bill, “One Auror died, and Mad-Eye ended up in St. Mungo’s with broken ribs.”

“He’s going to be okay, isn’t he?”

Arthur replied, “Yes, Harry, Alastor is going to be just fine.”

“Which Auror died?” persisted Harry.

“Bingins.” replied Lupin. “I don’t believe that you have ever met him.”

Harry shook his head mutely in reply. "I think I'm going to go upstairs to my room. Call me if anyone needs me." Then, Harry raced up the stairs and locked himself in his room. "Now, to see if I can pull off this transformation. Harry pulled out his wand and sealed the door so that it would take magic to open it. Then, he began the exercises of altering parts of his body. He extended his fingers and then reverted them. He changed the shape of his head. Then, he lengthened his arms. Next, he altered the length and shape of his legs. "Alright, now to try the total transformation." Harry said aloud to himself. "I just need to picture the animal that I wish to transform into and then will myself into that form." Harry summoned a full-length mirror and leaned it against the wall. He stood in front of it, and willed himself to be a black panther. He began by picturing himself in his mind's eye as the panther. Then, he closed his eyes and focused on the form. As it became sharper and more defined in his mind, he could feel himself changing more and more rapidly. After a couple of minutes, he opened his eyes to see a black panther staring from the mirror back at him. Next, he pictured himself as a human again and transformed back. "I wonder if I can do more than one form. I guess that its worth a shot." mused Harry aloud. So, next he pictured himself as a golden Phoenix. This seemed much more difficult than the first one. So, he poured all of his concentration into achieving the form. It took him nearly ten minutes to accomplish the feat, but when he opened his eyes there was a golden phoenix staring back at him. He spread his wings and took a once around the room. Then, he reverted to his human state. "Whew, that was tiring. I guess I need to try the panther, again and see if I can still do it." So, he attempted the transformation to the black panther, again. It was much easier to do this time and he had the transformation completed in less than a minute. He reverted to his natural form, and almost fell onto the bed in exhaustion. "I guess I had better rest for awhile. That really takes a lot out of you."

Suddenly, there was a knock on his door. He quickly removed the locking spell, and said, "Come in."

Ginny entered the room almost hesitantly, "Harry, you said that we could talk later, and I was hoping now would be a good time."

Harry smiled widely, "Of course, come on in, Ginny."

"Harry, you told me earlier to ask you some questions later, and that you would answer them." Ginny began before Harry stopped her.

"I believe that you are twisting my words, Miss Weasley. I told you that I might answer them. I never promised anything. So, let's see what your questions are?" replied Harry.

Ginny sighed in exasperation, "When you told Hermione that appearances could be deceiving earlier, you told her to keep something between the two of you. What were you talking about?"

Harry shook his head, "I will answer that question one day, but that day is not today. Next question."

Ginny huffed, "Well, then, how were you floating?"

"I don't know exactly how I was doing it, but I do know why. So, if you're interested then sit down and prepare for a story." Ginny proceeded to sit down in one of the two chairs in the room, but Harry shook his head, "You don't have to sit all the way over there." He lay on one side of the bed and then patted his hand on the other. Ginny blushed profusely, but came over and sat on the bed. "I'm not sure how to start, but you have to promise that this doesn't go any farther than this room. You can't even tell Hermione and Ron yet." Ginny nodded for him to continue. "I can tap into Voldemort's mind."

Ginny looked bewildered, "What do you mean?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair, "I can see what he sees, hear what he hears. I can even page through his thoughts and memories as if they were a book to read off of the shelf."

Ginny looked at him in amazement, "Are you serious?"

Harry nodded, "Very serious. That's what I was doing when you walked in on me the other day. I don't understand why yet, but when I enter Voldemort's mind I float."

"Weird."

"How do you think I feel. I'm the one with a line to the inner workings of the most evil man currently alive." said Harry.

Ginny smiled, "At least you will know how he thinks, so you can tell the Order how to fight him."

Later that night, Remus, Molly, Bill, and Ginny gave Harry a small birthday party that Ron and Hermione refused to come to. They both stayed upstairs.

Molly put her hands on her hips, "I'm going up there and give those two a piece of my mind."

Harry caught her arm and shook his head, "Let them be. They will get over this in their own time. Besides its their loss. They're missing an awesome cake."

All of them laughed. The night ended merrily for the five, and Harry went to bed later that night, perfectly content.

The next two weeks at Grimmauld Place settled themselves into a nice routine. Harry would go down to breakfast in the morning, eat and then be given some chore to be done for the day. Most often Ginny helped him with his chore and then he would help her with hers. Ron and Hermione did much the same, but continued to avoid Harry like the plague. There was another Order meeting that Harry attended, but nothing of consequence was discussed except for the security arrangements for when Harry and the others finally went to Diagon Alley.

Finally one morning, Hedwig arrived with the morning post and the students Hogwarts' letters were included. Harry opened his and found the standard letter from Professor McGonagall in the standard green ink. However, it was a bit longer than usual, and there were two more sheets of paper included.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Enclosed is the list of books for each possible subject that you may take at the N.E.W.T. level. Also enclosed is a class list. As a sixth year you must pick which classes that you wish to continue. We must receive your return owl no later than August the 25th.

Note that you are to catch the Hogwarts' Express on September 1st.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out his letter to mark down that he wanted to continue with Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Herbology. While he heard this he heard a squeak from his left. He looked over and saw Ginny holding a shiny Prefect badge in the Gryffindor colors. Harry smiled widely, "That's great, Ginny."

Mrs. Weasley turned around and asked, "What's great?"

Harry reached out and grabbed Ginny by the wrist and turned her arm to where Mrs. Weasley could see what she was holding in her hand. Mrs. Weasley leaped onto her daughter and buried her in a hug, "Ginny, that's wonderful. I'm so proud. My baby is a prefect."

Just then, Hermione and Ron came into the room. Ron asked, "Who's a prefect?" Ginny mutely held up her badge.

Hermione squealed, "Ginny, that's great. I'm so happy for you."

Ron smiled, "Great job, sis. Now, you can join me and Hermione in the prefect's carriage."

Mrs. Weasley beamed down at her daughter, "So, what present do you want when we go to Diagon Alley tomorrow."

"Can I have an owl, Mum. I want a snowy one like Harry's." It was at this moment that Ginny noticed that Harry had slipped from the room unnoticed. "Where did Harry go?" she asked.

Ron snorted, "Who cares?"

Ginny jumped and slapped Ron across the face hard, “You should. I thought he was your friend. Although, I don’t know why he would want you around. All you are is a giant prat.” Then, Ginny ran up the stairs to find Harry sitting on his bed. “Harry, why did you leave?”

Harry smiled, “In case you haven’t noticed, Ron and Hermione don’t stay in a room where I’m present for more than a few seconds. They were congratulating you on making prefect, so I beat a hasty retreat.”

“You didn’t have to leave.”

Harry smiled, “Yes, I did. Did I tell you how proud of you I was?”

Ginny shook her head, “No.”

“Then, I should be ashamed of myself. Ginny, I’m very proud of you. You earned it.”

“Harry, I... thank you.”

Harry smiled, “You’re welcome. Do you play chess?”

Ginny did a double-take at the change of subject, but nodded.

“Good, do you want to play with me? I haven’t had a game in a while, and I would like to play.”

Ginny grinned, “I would love to play with you.”

Harry then suffered three humiliating defeats in a row from the youngest Weasley. Finally, he said, “I give up. Have mercy. What is it with you Weasleys and chess?”

Ginny smiled impishly, “It’s a gift.”

“I can tell. I’ve never won a game against Ron, and I don’t see that I would ever have a prayer at beating you either.”

Ginny shook her head and said, “No, probably not.”

Harry pointed a finger at Ginny, “You had better watch yourself, Ginny, or I’ll transform and eat you.”

Ginny raised her eyebrow, “Transform?”

Harry clapped a hand over his mouth in surprise. Then, he said, “Did I really just say that?”

Ginny nodded, “Spill. What do you mean transform?”

Harry stood up and closed the door. “At this rate, you’re going to know all of my secrets. This one is really big. The Order doesn’t even know about this, yet. I’m an unregistered Animagus.”

Ginny looked at Harry as if he were crazy, “Do you really expect me to believe that, Harry?”

In response to her question, Harry changed into the black panther, and then quickly back into human form so that he could cover Ginny’s mouth to keep her from screaming.

When Ginny indicated that she wasn’t going to scream anymore, Harry let go of her mouth. “You were serious.”

Harry nodded, “I told you. Remember, though, that one is the mother lode secret. I haven’t even told Dumbledore, yet.”

“Why not?”

Harry shrugged, “I’m just waiting for the right time.”

Ginny said, “I’m going to go to my room for awhile. This was kind of a lot to take in.”

Harry opened the door, “I’ll talk to you later then.”

Ginny walked out of the room and then within thirty seconds she was back. Harry looked up from where he had sat on the bed, “That didn’t take long.”

Ginny shook her head as if she were trying to dispel a particularly disgusting image from her brain. “I just saw Ron and Hermione snogging.”

Harry jumped up, “Yes, its about time.”

“How can you be so happy about the fact that they are kissing?”

“Well, now that the two of them are together, I can chase the girl that I want without feeling guilty.” supplied Harry.

Ginny put her hands on her hips, “So, who is this girl you want to chase? Do I know her?”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that you do.”

Ginny motioned with her hands, “So are you going to tell me?”

Harry shook his head, “Ask me again sometimes. Maybe I’ll tell you.”

Ginny just stomped her feet and whirled around and swept from the room. Harry smiled to himself, “She’s good at that.”

5. Diagon Alley

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Unfortunately for Harry, nothing else about the morning was any good. He went downstairs for breakfast to be greeted by Remus, Tonks, and Sturgis Podmore, who he knew were assigned as his guards for the day. Mrs. Weasley sat a plate down in front of him and smiled cheerily, “Morning, Harry.” However, the three other teenagers in the room refused to look at him. After breakfast, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron went upstairs to get ready, but Harry hung back to talk to the adults. He fidgeted for a moment before Tonks said, “So, why aren’t the others talking to you?”

Harry scratched his head, “Well, Ron and Hermione aren’t talking to me because I won’t tell them what goes on in the Order meetings. They haven’t spoken to me since the day before my birthday.”

Lupin nodded, “We knew that, Harry, but Ginny has been hanging around you quite a bit the past couple of weeks.” His lips quivered in an almost smile that all of the adults shared.

Harry coughed, “Yeah, well, I kind of made her mad yesterday.”

Mrs. Weasley looked at him kindly, “What did you do?”

Harry squirmed uncomfortably, “Well, Ginny caught Ron and Hermione kissing yesterday.” All of the adults exchanged smiles at this. “Ginny came and told me about it. So, I sort of did a victory dance. So, she asked me why I was happy about it, and I told her that now that Ron and Hermione were together that I didn’t have to feel guilty about chasing the girl that I wanted to date.”

Tonks put her head in her hands, “Oh, Harry, you didn’t.”

Harry looked confused, “Didn’t what?”

Tonks shook her head, “Harry, you never tell a girl that likes you that you’re planning on chasing another girl.”

“I didn’t.”

Remus looked at him, “You just told us that you did.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Tonks sighed, “Yes, Harry, you did. You told her that you were going to chase another girl.”

Harry shook his head stubbornly, “No, I didn’t, because I was talking about her.”

Tonks started to contradict him again, “What?!”

Harry blushed as Tonks, Remus, and Molly crowded closer to him. Molly leaned over the table, “What does that mean?”

Harry flushed even redder, “It means that I want to date your daughter, Mrs. Weasley.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled, “I told you to call me Molly, dear. I have only one thing to say about the idea of you dating my daughter, though.” Harry cringed as though he expected her to tell him to stay away from Ginny. “It’s about time.”

Harry gaped, “What?”

Molly smiled, “I have been waiting and hoping that you would finally notice her one of these days. She has had a crush on you for so long. What finally changed your mind?”

“Nothing changed my mind. I have never gotten to know her. It’s hard to know whether or not you like someone when you can’t have a conversation with them that contains more than six words.” Harry replied.

Tonks looked at Harry, “Why couldn’t you have more of a conversation with her.”

Harry snorted, “Six words is basically as far as I could ever get before she would either do something clumsy, which would embarrass her and she would take off or someone around would say something to embarrass her and she would take off. It’s really hard to get an idea of what someone’s like when all you ever see of them is their back and flying hair as they flee from the room.”

By this point all of the adults were laughing wildly at Harry, who stood up and went to get ready for the day.

Tonks looked at Molly, “I knew she liked him, but I didn’t realize she had it that bad.”

Molly shook her head smiling, “It was worse. After the first day she saw him at the train station, she spent the entire next year talking about nothing else. She was smitten from day one.”

Lupin grinned, “Well, from what I see, young Harry is just as smitten. Its not as if there was ever any doubt that he would fall for her eventually.”

Tonks looked over at him, “What does that mean?”

Lupin smiled even wider, “Well, Lily was a red-head.”

“So.”

“Every male Potter for the last five generations has married a red-head. Harry didn’t have a chance. It’s in his blood.”

Molly looked sharply at Lupin, “Does Harry know that?”

Lupin shook his head, “Not a clue. I promise I’ll tell him when he puts a ring on her finger.”

Molly harrumphed, “Well, I’m sure that will be some time away.”

Lupin really grinned then, “I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Molly. James was in his seventh year when he proposed to Lily. One more year to go.”

The four adults heard footsteps on the stairs, so they broke off the conversation. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny came into the room together. A few minutes later Harry came in. Mrs. Weasley hurried over. “Alright, everyone grab a pinch of Floo Powder. Remus, you first. Tonks. Sturgis. Harry. Ron. Hermione. Ginny.”

Each person called out Diagon Alley and leaped into the flames. They came out in the Leaky Cauldron. Mrs. Weasley came out last and began brushing the soot off of everyone with her brush. “Let’s go then. Everyone stay together. We’re going to go to Gringott’s first.”

When they arrived at Gringott’s, Lupin, Molly, and Harry went down to the vaults. Mrs. Weasley got money from the Weasley vault. Harry scraped a sack full of galleons and sickles into a pouch for himself. Then, they were back to the lobby, and out into Diagon Alley. They went to the Apothecary for Ginny, Hermione, and Harry to restock potion ingredients. Mrs. Weasley spoke up, “We’re going to stop by the twins’ shop next. We’ll get your books at Flourish and Blott’s after that. We’ll go to get your owl last, Ginny dear.”

Ginny smiled, “Okay, mum.”

The group filed into Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Harry immediately noticed that there were a lot of young people crowding the store. It was easy to see why. The shelves were covered with different types of candies that produced a myriad of effects. The twins were obviously working overtime coming up with new inventions. Harry slouched against a wall, while the Weasley family spoke to the two practical jokesters. After a few minutes the rest of the family began wandering around the store to look at different things, and the twins came over to Harry. “What’s the matter, mate?” asked Fred.

Harry shrugged, “Ginny, Ron, and Hermione aren’t talking to me.”

“Why not?” asked George.

“Well, Ron and Hermione haven’t spoken to me since I joined the Order and refused to tell them anything that was going on. Ginny got mad at me last night, because she thinks that I like some other girl.” answered Harry.

Fred and George exchanged glances and then smiled at Harry, “Don’t worry, mate. Ginny won’t stay mad at you for long.” said George.

“Yeah,” Fred nodded, “she’s liked you for entirely too long to stop talking to you. I wouldn’t be surprised if she started talking to you before the day is out.”

George clapped Harry on the back, “Yeah, buck up. Our little Ginny has got a temper as fiery as mum’s, but she’s really soft-hearted. She’ll forgive you for liking another girl.”

Harry protested, “I don’t like another girl, though. It was all a misunderstanding. I was talking about her.” Harry broke off as he realized what he had just said.

Fred and George both grinned widely, “Don’t worry, Harry. Your secrets safe with us. We just wanted to know for ourselves. You better take care of her.”

Harry nodded, “You don’t have to worry about that. Ginny can take care of herself just fine, but if she ever needs some help, I’m going to be right there beside her.”

Molly Weasley walked over, “Harry, it’s time to go to the bookshop now.” Harry nodded and waved good-bye to the twins. He followed Molly, and the rest of the group to Flourish and Blott’s to buy their books.

As they exited Flourish and Blott’s there was a distinctive pop that signaled the Apparition of a wizard or witch. Suddenly there was a scream as someone noticed the six Death Eaters. Sturgis went for his wand and was immediately stunned. Two other Death Eaters had their wands leveled at Lupin and Tonks while three more covered Molly, Hermione, and Ron. The sixth grabbed Ginny by the arm and held their wand at Ginny’s throat almost like a knife.

The one holding Ginny spoke, “Where is Potter?” It was immediately obvious that this Death Eater was female. Everyone looked around as they realized that Harry wasn’t with them. The woman tightened her grip on Ginny and repeated loudly, “Where is Potter?”

“Calm down, Bellatrix. I’m right here.” The Death Eaters turned to see Harry standing in the street with his wand drawn.

Bellatrix laughed, “So, are you prepared to fight for the little girl, Potter?”

“I killed your half-breed boss’ Basilisk four years ago because he threatened Ginny. The question isn’t whether I’m willing to fight for her, but if you are willing to die to attack her?”

A Death Eater to the left of Bellatrix snorted. “Still trying to play the hero, Potter?”

Harry smiled, “Lucius, I was wondering when you were going to come out and play.”

Lucius took a step forward but one of the other Death Eaters said, “Remember what we are here for.”

Lucius stopped himself, “Of course, of course. Here are the terms, Potter. You come with us willingly, and we let the girl go and leave without killing anyone.”

Harry interrupted him, “I have a better idea. You let Ginny go, and I decide not to kill everyone of you right here and now.”

Bellatrix laughed shrilly, “Potter, you have gotten bold. We can Disapparate from here with the girl and there would be nothing you could do about it.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, “Really, I would like to see you try that considering you are all bound by a Disapparation Jinx.”

Lucius boomed laughter at that, “You expect us to believe that you can cast that spell, Potter? My what fantasy.”

Harry smiled knowingly, “Try it and find out.”

Lucius attempted to Disapparate and discovered that he could not leave the Alley. “He’s right, we are bound.”

Bellatrix turned her masked face towards him. “No matter. Potter, you will remove the jinx and come with us or I will kill the girl.”

“I don’t think so, Bella. You won’t kill her.”

Bellatrix laughed evilly, “Oh, Potter, I assure you that I will.”

Harry shook his head, “No, you won’t. In case you haven’t noticed there are Aurors all over the place. The only thing keeping them from attacking at this very moment is the fact that you are holding Ginny. The second you remove the hostage, I’m afraid its back to jail. So, as I said, you won’t kill her.”

“Perhaps you are right, Potter. We shall see how she handles the Cruciatus Curse, however.” Bellatrix proceeded to flick her wand up to cast the Cruciatus Curse on Ginny. In the split second that the wand was not pointed at Ginny, Harry acted. Two spells rang out from the two wands that he had. One in each hand. From his right hand came the first, “Accio Ginny.” From his left came the second spell, “Expelliarmus.” Two things happened immediately. Ginny was ripped from Bellatrix’s grasp and Bella’s wand went flying. A moment after Ginny was away from Bellatrix, a dozen stunners caught the six Death Eaters, and sent them to the ground.

Harry hugged Ginny to him, “Are you O.K.”

Ginny began crying onto Harry’s shoulder, “Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry I didn’t talk to you this morning. I was so mean.”

Harry was patting her on the back, “It’s okay, It’s okay. You’re alright now. Don’t worry.”

Mad-Eye walked up to Harry as the other Aurors were binding and enervating the Death Eaters. “I’m impressed, Potter. Where did you get the second wand?”

Harry smiled, “Sturgis.” and handed the wand over.

Moody laughed, “Well, good job. We landed six Death Eaters today.”

Harry shook his head, “We need to let one of them go.”

Everyone around him screamed, “What?!!”

“I’m serious. I need a messenger to go back to Voldemort. This is the best I’m going to get.”

Moody nodded, “Alright, Potter. Which one do you want to let go?”

Harry replied immediately, “Lucius. Except for Bellatrix, he’s the highest ranking Death Eater. I wouldn’t let that bitch go if my life depended on it.”

Everyone looked to be in shock, both from Harry’s request and his use of language regarding Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry pulled Ginny’s arms away from his neck and pushed her gently towards her mother. “Sorry, I’ve got to go work.”

Moody and Harry walked over to where Dawlish was putting the Body Bind on Lucius to prepare him for transport to the Ministry. “Hold it, Dawlish, we’re going to let this one go.”

Dawlish looked at Moody as if he had lost his mind, “What?”

“You heard me. Potter needs to send a message to the Dark Lord. He needs an errand boy. We figure that kind of job is right up Malfoy’s alley.” replied Moody.

“The Minister will not approve of this.”

Harry stepped forward, “Well, considering all the hell he put me through with trying to get me kicked out of school last year, he owes me a few. He’ll get over it. If he doesn’t, he can take it up with the business end of my wand. “Finite Incantato.” Now, Lucius, you’re going to be a good little boy and take a message back to Tom for me.”

Lucius gritted his teeth, “You can go to hell, Potter.”

Harry smiled, “You have a choice, Malfoy. You can take the message to Voldemort, or you can go into custody with the Aurors. Your choice.”

“Fine, Potter, what am I to tell the Dark Lord.”

“First, tell him that I know the contents of the Prophecy. All of it. Tell him that I know he’s going to die. Tell him that I know how to kill him. Tell him that he and I have a date with destiny that will come soon. Tell him to be afraid, very afraid. Now, go.”

Lucius disappeared as quickly as he was given leave to go.

Mad-Eye swung around to look at Potter, “What the hell was that about? Are you crazy?”

“No, when the Order meets again, I’ll explain what I just did.” replied Harry.

“That will be tonight. As soon as Dumbledore finds out about this he’s going to be livid.” muttered Moody.

Harry smiled and shook his head, “You may be right, but I would be willing to bet money that before the night is out, that Dumbledore will think what I just did is one of the funniest things he has ever heard.”

Ron and Hermione both came running over to Harry. “Are you crazy, Harry?” shrieked Hermione with tears in her eyes.

Ron was extremely pale, “She’s right, Harry, you could have gotten yourself killed.”

Harry snorted, “So, now you’re talking to me. I’m going to check on Ginny.” Harry then walked back over to where Mrs. Weasley was holding Ginny. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Ginny, are you okay?”

Ginny turned from Mrs. Weasley arms to fling herself at Harry, “I’m so glad you’re alright, Harry.”

Harry smiled as he wrapped his arms around Ginny. “I’m fine, Ginny, and I am so glad that you weren’t hurt.”

Mrs. Weasley enveloped both of them in a hug, “Thank you so much, Harry. You saved her again. You brought my baby back to me.”

Ron and Hermione looked on in horror as they realized what they had done. Then, they hugged and began to cry.

Harry shook Ginny very gently, “Ginny, come on. Look at me.” Ginny looked up at Harry with a tear streaked face, and Harry smiled, “Everyone’s okay. No one got hurt. I think its time to go and pick out your owl.”

Ginny almost jumped in surprise at the ordinary statement and smiled broadly up at Harry, “Let’s go.” Then, they walked in to Eyelop’s Owl Emporium hand in hand.

Later, that afternoon after they returned to Grimmauld Place, and Ginny had settled her new snowy owl in his cage, Dumbledore entered the kitchen. He looked sharply at Harry, “We need to talk. Miss Weasley, I must ask you to leave us alone.”

“Yes, professor.” She patted Harry on the shoulder as she left the room. Arthur and Molly walked in and closed the door behind Ginny. Then, the three adults sat down at the table.

“Harry, I must ask why you did this?” he sounded almost disappointed.

Harry replied, “Who else is coming?”

Dumbledore replied, “Remus, Tonks, Kingsley, and Alastor will be here momentarily.”

“We’ll wait for them, then. I have no desire to have this conversation more than once. Besides, I have a bet with Moody on your reaction, sir.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened, “This is serious, Harry. You let a known Death Eater go free this afternoon to send an insult to Voldemort.”

Harry smiled, “My reason for letting Lucius go was hardly that trivial, but I will explain in a moment, and I daresay that you will agree with me.”

Dumbledore merely nodded his head, “We shall see.”

A few minutes later all of the others were assembled around the table to listen to Harry.

Lupin spoke first, “Alright, Harry, why did you let Lucius go?”

Harry snorted, “Well, that was direct. I know what all of you are thinking. I decided I wanted to send Voldemort an insult. I was being childish. I should have known better. In fact most of you are probably thinking right now that it was a mistake to let a kid into the Order of the Phoenix.”

All of the adults exchanged glances and it was readily apparent that Harry had hit the nail on the head.

Harry snorted again, “Well, you’re all wrong. Tell me, Remus. What did Voldemort spend all of last year trying to get?”

Lupin shrugged, “The Prophecy. You already knew that, Harry.”

“I did. Now, Tonks, can you tell me why he wanted it so badly?”

Tonks looked puzzled, “He wanted to know how to kill you.”

Harry smiled, “Exactly.”

Kingsley entered the conversation then, “So what does that mean or prove?”

“Well, you have all heard the Prophecy. Does it tell Voldemort how to kill me?” All of the adults shook their head. “However, Voldemort believes that the Prophecy would tell him this. If he believes that, doesn’t it follow that he would believe that the Prophecy also holds the key to his death?”

Lupin nodded, “It would follow the logic of the argument. But, Harry, the Prophecy doesn’t tell you how to beat Voldemort.”

Harry smiled even wider, “I know that. He doesn’t.”

The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes began to sparkle again as he looked at the boy, no young man in front of him. Alastor broke in, “So, you sent that message with Lucius to make Voldemort think you know how to kill him. How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t really. At least not yet. All the message accomplished was to piss him off. I’ll get to that later. You, however, Moody, get to answer the next question. What is Voldemort’s greatest weapon?”

“People are afraid of him. That has always been the dark side’s greatest advantage.”

“Exactly. I just took that weapon away from him. If we had merely sent the Death Eaters to the Ministry under custody, Voldemort would have known that he lost today. He would have simply assumed that he had been betrayed from within, and guessed that the Aurors were waiting for the Death Eaters. However, by sending Malfoy back to let him know what really happened..”

“You let him know how badly and easily that the Death Eaters were beaten. Which lends credibility to the message that you sent.” finished Lupin.

Harry nodded, “So, the more powerful I appear to be, the less likely Voldemort is to attack for fear of exposing himself to me. He’s going to set up another attack as soon as possible. My guess is when we get on the train to King’s Cross. As long as I make it through that fight unscathed, the plan will work beautifully. Voldemort will think that I have both the knowledge and power to destroy him. It will make him play the game carefully. So, basically what I just did, ladies and gentlemen is to buy us time. I don’t know how much, but its more than we would have otherwise.”

Dumbledore laughed out loud, “Harry, exactly when did you become so diabolically clever?”

Harry grinned mischievously, “Professor, I am the son and godson of Marauders. Also, I have been on the receiving end of several of Voldemort’s diabolical schemes. You don’t stay on the bad end of them as many times as I have and not pick up a trick or two. Moody, I believe I won the bet. I told you he would laugh before the meeting was over.”

Moody growled, “That you did, Potter. I believe I’m going to have to change my opinion of you.” Then, he flipped a Galleon to Harry.

Lupin let his head sink into his hands, “I can’t believe this. We’ve created a monster.” He turned to Arthur and Molly, “Are you sure that you want to let your daughter date him.” he said as he pointed at Harry.

Arthur turned sharply as Molly smiled, “What’s this about Harry dating Ginny? No one has asked me yet.”

Harry flushed scarlet, “Well, see, I, Er, I told your wife that I wanted to.”

Arthur shook his head, “You were supposed to ask my permission.”

“I haven’t started dating her. I haven’t even asked her out.” Harry protested.

“You were planning on doing it, though weren’t you?” asked Arthur accusingly.

Harry looked left and right as if he didn’t know what to say or do, “I, uh, I need to go to my room. As long as their isn’t anymore Order business. I’m going to go.”

Molly Weasley’s voice rang out, “Harry James Potter, get back over here. Now, Arthur.” she said sternly. “Stop torturing the poor boy.”

Arthur smiled, “Harry, you have my permission to date Ginny.”

Harry looked up, “Really.” Then, his look changed to one of terror. “Now I have to figure out how to ask her out. Oh, brother.”

Alastor Moody cackled, “This is amazing. He can match wits with the Dark Lord, but he’s afraid of asking out a girl.”

Harry shook his head emphatically, “It’s a lot harder to deal with girls than it is Voldemort. At least when I make him mad I can throw a curse at him. If the girl is mad at you, it’s a whole different game. Being on the bad side of the Weasley temper isn’t something that I would wish on anyone.” Harry stated.

The adults burst out laughing at him once again.

6. To the Hogwart’s Express.

Harry spent the last week and a half of the summer meditating and goofing around with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Ron and Hermione had apologized over and over again for ignoring him. Ginny had thanked him over and over again for saving her life. There was one final Order meeting before the trip to King’s Cross. It was to discuss the defense plan.

Harry jumped right in, “First question, who’s going to be there.”

Dumbledore smiled, “You don’t waste any time, Harry. Kingsley, report.”

Kingsley Shackleboat stood up, “Okay, we have been trying to approach a few people outside of the Order to help us. We don’t want to make a full Ministry action out of it because the Death Eaters would get wind of it. Outside of the Order, Dawlish, Adams, and Amos Diggory are going to be there. From the Order, myself, Tonks, Alastor, and Sturgis are going to be waiting in the station with the other three. Remus, Arthur, and Molly are going to be traveling with Harry and the others. I understand that Professor Dumbledore is going to have professors stationed on the train to protect the students. I just don’t think we’ve got enough people for this.”

Harry shook his head, “No, anymore, and they would just break off the attack and flee. We’ve got to make it seem like an even match-up. I expect there to be eight to ten Death Eaters at the most. Voldemort isn’t going to be willing to risk more than that. They won’t attack until they see me. So, the key is going to be making sure that the other students are on the train. With Amos, and the other two Aurors, there will be ten of us. It should work. Professor Dumbledore, we need the boarding whistle for the train to go off ten minutes early. That way we can insure that most of the students will be out of the way. The few stragglers will get on when curses start flying.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I understand. However, I don’t like putting the students in danger, Harry.”

Harry looked stricken, “Do you think I do, Professor? I hate this, but the attack is going to come, and I would rather have it now when we are at least ready for it.”

Dumbledore smiled, “I know, Harry, I know.”

Molly asked, “What did you mean by there will be ten of us, Harry?”

“Dawlish, Adams, Diggory, Remus, Kingsley, Sturgis, Moody, Arthur, Nymphadora, and me.”

“I know you did not just call me Nymphadora, Potter.”

Harry grinned mischievously, “Sorry, Tonks, but I just couldn’t resist a tension breaker.” Harry continued to smile impishly at Tonks while she waved a fist at him.

Molly inserted, “I believe, I make eleven.”

Harry shook his head, “You won’t be in the fight, Molly. You have a much more important job.”

Molly looked at him in surprise, “What is that?”

“Getting Ginny, Ron, and Hermione onto that train and keeping them there. If I know those three, they will fight tooth and nail to get to me. I don’t want them hurt.”

Molly smiled, “I understand, Harry, but we don’t want you hurt either.”

“I know, but I don’t have a choice but to be involved. If I’m not there Voldemort will think me a coward, and then the whole plan comes crashing down around our heads.”

Molly began to cry slightly, “But, what if you die, Harry?”

Harry snorted, “Don’t worry, I have no intention of making Ginny a widow before I even propose marriage to her.”

The entire room looked at him in shock. Harry paused and then flushed red when he realized what he had just said, “I, er, that didn’t come out right.”

Lupin smiled, “No, Harry, I think that came out just perfect.”

Harry blushed even deeper and then said, “Never mind. Back to the subject at hand. The Death Eaters won’t make their move until they see me. We will intentionally arrive at the last minute so as to avoid the other students. The way I see it, it’s the best we can do.”

Dumbledore stood and laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder, “It isn’t easy to have the weight of the world on your shoulders?”

Harry shook his head mournfully, “No, its not, but it’s a burden that I am willing to carry. Not that I have a choice in the matter.”

Alastor spoke up, “Just remember, Potter, you don’t have to carry the burden alone.”

“If I thought that, Moody, I would have already been crushed.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and go to bed, Harry. You have a long day ahead of you tomorrow.”

Harry shook his head, “Why is it that I get the feeling that I’m going to be spending some quality time with Madam Pomfrey before tomorrow is over?” said Harry ruefully before heading up the stairs to bed.

The next morning while everyone was getting ready. Harry cornered the other three teenagers in the kitchen. “Today, when we get to Platform 9 3/4, something is going to happen, and I expect the three of you to keep your heads down, and obey orders immediately and without question.”

Ron asked peevishly, “And if we don’t?”

Harry whipped out his wand and leveled at Ron’s nose, “I stun everyone of you right here, and you get to wonder what’s going on instead of actually knowing. Your choice.”

Ron and Ginny nodded, but Hermione asked, “If we’re following orders, what are you going to be doing?”

“Something you will consider idiotic, I am sure.” Harry replied evasively.

Hermione continued, “What are you going to be doing?”

Harry held up his hand, “You’ll see. Just remember what I said. You have to do as you are told and get on that train. I want your word that no matter what happens, that all three of you are going to get on that train.”

Hermione nodded, “We will, Harry.”

He spun around, “Let’s go then.”

The group arrived at King’s Cross with barely a minute to spare. They all rushed towards the barrier. Harry stopped and drew his wand. So did, Remus and Arthur. Harry turned, “Molly, take Ron, Hermione, and Ginny first. We’ll be just behind.”

Ginny grabbed Harry in a hug. “Harry, you be careful.”

Harry smiled down at her, “I will. Don’t worry.”

The three teenagers and Molly disappeared through the barrier onto Platform 9 ¾. Lupin turned to Harry, “Are you ready?”

Harry nodded, “Let’s do this.”

The three of them stepped through the barrier quickly. As soon as Harry stepped onto the platform, there was the distinctive pop of Apparating wizards. There were ten of them decked out in their black robes and masks. The Death Eaters had barely sprung into being when there were curses flying in every direction. Harry tipped over his trolley and trunk and took cover behind it. He then started hurling hexes at the Death Eaters. He quickly assessed where everyone was. Lupin was squatted down directly beside him. Arthur was staying behind cover in the archway and occasionally popping out to fire off a curse before ducking back. Harry jumped and dropped one of the Death Eaters with a Full Body Bind just as Mad-Eye caught another one with a stunner. That left the odds at ten to eight. Check that, nine to eight, as Harry saw Adams go down to four stunners simultaneously. Dawlish managed to pick off another one. Harry leaned over towards Lupin, “This is going rather well, but we’ve got to end it quicker, or someone’s going to get hurt. I’m going to try and get up to where Tonks and Kingsley are. Cover me.” Then, Harry jumped and ran to one of the wall sconces while hurling Disarming Charms at the Death Eaters. Once he ducked behind cover, he noticed that Diggory and Dawlish had dropped another Death Eater. He leaned and then had to jerk back to dodge a stunner. “Damn.” Harry mumbled under his breath as he saw Kingsley go down. That left Tonks two on one. Two of the remaining Death Eaters were dueling Amos Diggory and Dawlish. The other two were keeping Lupin, Sturgis, and Mr. Weasley pinned down behind cover. That left Harry open to try something. He looked around, “Where the hell is Mad-Eye?” Then, he noticed him down too. Harry sent a Reductor Curse at the two Death Eaters hammering away at Arthur, Sturgis, and Remus. They leapt aside as the trolley exploded and Sturgis caught one of them with a stunning spell, while Lupin got the other with a body bind.

“Avada” Harry spun and leapt at Tonks. “Kedavra.” Harry just managed to knock her clear and the familiar bolt of green light bounced harmlessly off the wall. “Stupefy.” Harry managed to catch one of her two attackers with the spell. The other one whipped his wand around and said, “Explodra.” Harry shoved Tonks out of the way as the spell hit and he was catapulted into the air from the explosion. He hit the ground with a loud thud. He rolled and then countered, “Petrificus Totalus.” and dropped the Death Eater in his tracks. He managed to lean his head and glance to see that the others had made short work of the remaining two Death Eaters.

Tonks cradled his head in her lap as Aurors began popping onto the platform with medi-witches to clean up the mess. Dumbledore appeared beside her. “Is he okay, Tonks?”

She looked up teary eyed, “He saved my life. I don’t know. He got hit point blank with an Explosion Hex.”

Dumbledore picked up a rock and muttered, “Portus. Here, take this Portkey. I told Madam Pomfrey to stand ready to receive Harry. I figured he would do something dangerous.”

Tonks grabbed the Portkey and placed Harry’s finger on it then tapped it with her wand. They appeared right in the middle of Hogwart’s hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey bustled over to Tonks. “Help me get him onto a bed. This boy seems determined to make me have a heart attack.”

Tonks smiled, “He can do that.”

Amidst all of the confusion that occurred when the Death Eaters arrived, no one really noticed that the train had actually left. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stood with Mrs. Weasley as long as they could see what was going on. Ron was ashen faced, while the two girls had tears in their eyes. Hermione kept repeating, “We need to help him. We need to help him.”

Ron looked at his mother as Harry disappeared from sight, “Why didn’t you let us help in the battle.”

Mrs. Weasley shook her head, “Harry didn’t want any of you involved.”

Ron persisted stubbornly, “Why, though, does he think we’re worthless?”

It was Ginny that answered, “No, Ron, he doesn’t think we’re worthless. He just wants to keep us alive. If we were out there fighting, then Harry would have to worry about us. That would distract him, and might get him killed.”

Hermione cried even harder, and Ron swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. “Well, we’re not accomplishing anything standing here. Let’s go find a compartment. I don’t think that Prefects will even bother meeting after this.” The three made their way down the corridor while Molly went in search of some of the professors.

They found Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood sitting in a compartment alone about halfway up the train. They drug their trunks in and greeted the two. “Hi, Neville. Hi, Luna.”

Neville looked up expectantly, “Hi, guys. Where’s Harry?”

Ginny and Hermione started crying again, which left Ron to answer, “Still out on the platform.”

Neville looked horrified, “Why didn’t he get on the train?”

Ron shrugged, “I don’t know, but I think he was the target. If he had tried to leave with us the Death Eaters would have followed.”

Luna asked dreamily, “What happened? We couldn’t see properly from this far up the train.”

Hermione composed herself enough to answer, “When Harry came onto the platform, the Death Eaters appeared, and they started fighting. It seemed like there were several people helping Harry, though. He wasn’t by himself at least.”

Ginny sniffled, “Like that would have mattered. Harry would have tried to take them on by himself. When I see him I’m going to kill him.”

Ron nodded, “I know exactly what you mean, Ginny.”

Hermione started crying again, “I just hope he’s alright.”

Neville smiled, “Cheer up. Harry will be fine.”

Ginny looked at him, “How do you know that?”

“He always is. I have faith that Harry will come through in any situation.” replied Neville.

Ginny nodded, “So do I.”

The five teenagers continued to talk and express various worries about Harry’s safety. Then, they would discuss strangling him for putting them through this. This continued until the compartment door opened to reveal none other than Draco Malfoy flanked by his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle.

Ron looked up, “Shove off, Malfoy.”

“Temper, temper, Weasley. I’m amazed actually. I expected you and the Mudblood to be out helping Potter.” responded Malfoy snidely.

Suddenly, all five of them had their wands leveled at Malfoy, “I said shove off Malfoy.”

“Threatening a prefect. All of you are going to be in serious trouble for this.”

Hermione smiled acidly, “I don’t think so, Malfoy. In case you haven’t noticed there are three prefects in this room.”

“Four.” inserted Luna, and she flashed her prefect badge.

Hermione smirked, “So, as you see, you are outnumbered. I suggest that you leave.”

Neville broke in, “As Ron said, shove off, Malfoy.”

Draco smiled, “Just watch out. I’ll catch you alone eventually.”

Ginny smiled, “You should be the one to watch out, Draco. Harry will be the one to catch you. After what I saw him do to the Death Eaters in Diagon Alley, I would be careful if I were you.”

Draco snorted, “We’ll see, Weasley. We’ll see.” After that the three of them left the five to themselves.

A few hours later, the train arrived at the station in Hogsmeade. The five of them got out and prepared to head to the castle.

7. The Sorting Hat

Dumbledore walked into the hospital wing. “Poppy, how is Harry?”

Poppy bustled over to him. “He’s fine, Albus. He’s just sleeping at this point.”

“How bad were his injuries?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea how he was still conscious when he came in. He had three broken ribs, a broken arm and a fracture in his skull. Not to mention several cuts and bruises.”

“How long will he have to stay here?” asked Dumbledore.

Poppy shrugged, “I suppose he could leave in the morning. He should wake up later, but I would like him to stay overnight.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I’m sure that his friends will want to come check on him later. Please allow them to wait until he wakes. After they have spoken to him for a little while, you may send them back to their tower.”

Poppy nodded, “I will let them stay with him for awhile, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore smiled, “Well, I must get downstairs to prepare for the feast. I’m sure they will be here as soon as they are through eating.”

Poppy smiled, “I am sure they will be.”

At just this moment the five teenagers in question were crowding into a carriage for the trip from Hogsmeade up to the castle.

Ginny piped up, “I wonder if Harry will be at the feast?”

Hermione nodded, “I hope so. You know with all that has been going on, we haven’t asked the pivotal question.”

“What are you on about?” replied Ron.

Hermione inserted, “Who is going to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?”

“I heard it was going to be an Auror.” Neville put in.

“Where did you hear that at, Neville?” asked Ron.

“Gran.”

“It makes sense.” said Hermione.

Ron looked confused, “What makes sense?”

Hermione said churlishly, “Honestly, Ron, I don’t know how I manage to ever have a conversation with you. It makes sense for the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to be an Auror. I wonder which one it is?”

Ginny smiled, “I, for one, hope its Tonks.”

Ron grinned, “That would be great, she’s a lot of fun.”

“Ron, our teachers are not here to be fun.” chided Hermione.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, they’re here for our intellectual development or some such rubbish. Hermione, do you ever just lighten up?” asked Ron.

“I can’t just lighten up because you won’t take anything seriously, so I have to stay on your case.” huffed Hermione.

Ginny sighed, “Harry is going to be so disappointed.”

Luna looked over dreamily, “Why is Harry going to be disappointed?”

Ginny looked at Luna and grinned, “He thought that if Hermione and Ron started dating that they might stop fighting. He was obviously wrong.”

Ron looked askance, “Hermione and I aren’t dating.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows, “The way you two were stuck together at the lips the other day, you could have fooled me.”

Hermione turned beet red, “You saw us?”

Ginny grinned cheekily, “On two different occasions I might add.”

Even Ron flushed at this. Luckily, at just that moment the carriage stopped in front of the castle, which allowed Hermione and Ron to beat a hasty retreat into the castle. The other three followed giggling slightly. When they walked into the Great Hall, they looked around rapidly for Harry. When they didn’t see him, they made for Professor Dumbledore at the staff table in a hurry. Dumbledore looked up and saw the group making his way to him and chuckled.

Ginny got to him first, “Professor Dumbledore, where’s Harry? Is he alright? He’s not hurt, is he?”

Dumbledore smiled, “Don’t worry. Mr. Potter is just fine. He’s in the hospital wing sleeping right now. I’ve made arrangements for all of you to go up and wait with him after the feast. He should wake up in another hour or so. That leaves you all plenty of time to eat. Now, off to your tables.”

Luna went to the Ravenclaw table, while the other four made their way over to the Gryffindor table. Once everyone was seated the doors opened, and in came Professor McGonagall leading the first years. She walked up in front of the staff table and pulled out the Sorting Hat. The mouth split open on the brim, and this song sprang forth.

It was over a thousand years ago

When the founders were united still

Before the days of woe

Before Slytherin broke the deal

Forged by the four

Who started it all.

So, Hogwarts opened its door

And many young ones answered its call.

Then, the four did divide

The throng into the favorite of each

And while the four lived, they did bide

Their time and separated those they decided to teach.

Now that the founders have left the throng

They left me to finish the split.

So, each year I use a song

To separate the students, and do my bit.

Now, let us see to which house you belong.

Step right up and we will see.

Perhaps the ambition of Slytherin is for what you long

Or maybe a brilliant Ravenclaw is what you want to be.

Some like hard work, and will go to Hufflepuff.

Others keep bravery in their heart and will become Gryffindor.

Now, onto the sorting for the tough.

So, step forward and find out what's in store.

Everyone clapped merrily as the hat finished the song. Then McGonagall pulled a list from inside her robes. "When I call your name, come up and put on the Sorting Hat. It will tell you which house you are in." Then, she began to call out names.

While she was doing this Ginny leaned over and asked Hermione, "If Harry was alright, why is he in the hospital wing?"

She shrugged, "I don't know, Ginny, but we're going to find out shortly. I guess we just have to wait."

Ginny nodded mutely as the sorting was completed and Dumbledore stood up to begin the announcements.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts. We will begin with the repeated announcement, The Forbidden Forest is off limits to all students, regardless of year. Quidditch Captains will be informed of their duties by their Heads of House within the first couple of days of term. Quidditch tryouts for each house will be determined by the captain. I would like to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Ms. Nymphadora Tonks." Surprisingly, Tonks didn't react to the usage of her first name. There was much polite applause, but none as loud as Hermione, Ron and Ginny. Dumbledore continued, "Also, due to the success of the Yule Ball that was held during the Tri-Wizard tournament, we have decided to have a ball the day before Christmas vacation begins. The ball will be open to all students in fourth year and above. Although you may invite a younger student if you wish. Dress robes will be worn as it is a formal occasion. I'm sure anyone who does not have dress robes will be able to find whatever they need at the division of Gladrag's Wizard Wear that has opened up in the village. I know you are all wondering about the attack at Platform 9 ¾. It is my pleasure to inform you that there were no serious injuries incurred by any of the participants in the battle. Also, all ten of the Death Eaters that were involved were captured by the Ministry. This was a great victory for us today. It was all brought about by the hard work of one student. I ask you to raise your glass in toast to Harry Potter."

Most of the students in the hall raised their glasses and then drank a toast to Harry Potter. After this the Gryffindors especially began to look around to try and find Harry. It was readily apparent that he was not present in the hall.

Dumbledore began again, "I regret to inform you that Harry was mildly injured in the attack. He will rejoin you in the morning for breakfast. For now, however, let's eat." As Dumbledore sat down the magnificent food for the feast appeared on the table. All four Gryffindors began to put food on their plates and eat rapidly for they wanted to get up to the hospital wing and see Harry.

After a hurried meal in which Ron ate as much as any three people, the four Gryffindors got up from the table and headed for the door. They were joined by Luna and they turned to look at Professor Dumbledore, who merely smiled and nodded for them to go ahead. The five students made their way through the castle to the hospital wing. Poppy opened the door for them to enter, "Be quiet and allow him to rest. You will have to wait until he wakes up naturally to talk to him."

Ginny nodded, "We'll be as quiet as a mouse, Madam Pomfrey."

Hermione, as always, was after information, "How long until he wakes up, Madam Pomfrey?"

Madam Pomfrey shrugged, "Another half an hour to an hour at the most. Now, I have things to do, so stay right here."

Luna, Ron, Neville, and Hermione gathered around the bed while Ginny began pacing back and forth at the foot of the bed. They stayed this way for about twenty minutes until Harry began to stir. He opened his eyes and saw four concerned faces looking down at him. "Hi, guys."

Hermione said peevishly, "That's all you have to say. We've been crazy with worry all day."

Harry snorted, "I've been out that long?"

"Yes, Harry James Potter, you have been out that long. You have got a lot of explaining to do. How dare you do this to us. I don't know what I would do without you around. Then, you go running off and try to get yourself killed." burst out Ginny savagely.

The other four backed away to allow Harry to look directly at Ginny. He smiled widely. "What exactly do you think you are smiling at?" snapped Ginny.

Harry smiled even wider if such a thing were possible, "You."

"Why are you staring at me?"

"Does anyone else see what I see? Ron, I know you don't. How about you, Neville?" asked Harry.

Neville shook his head wondering if Harry had taken a blow to the head. "Then, come over here and look from my angle." Harry motioned for Neville to come and lean down beside him. He pointed at Ginny, "Notice, the almost challenging way that she places her hands on her hips. Then, look up and see the way that she is gnawing on her bottom lip. Then, you see the faint flush of anger in her cheeks. It almost matches the color of her hair. Now, as she really starts to get mad since I'm talking about her, you can see the flash of her eyes. So, now do you see it?"

Ginny burst out before Neville could answer, since she could contain herself no longer, "Just exactly what is he supposed to see, Mr. Potter?"

"That you, Miss Weasley, are an exceptionally beautiful young lady, and that your anger only makes you more attractive." replied Harry beaming.

Five jaws fell open at this pronouncement. Ginny flushed completely scarlet and bolted from the room. Her thoughts were awl in her mind, but one overpowering sentence thundered through her head. Harry Potter just told me I was beautiful. Harry Potter just told me I was beautiful. This continued like a mantra all the way back to her room.

Back in the hospital wing, Ron finally recovered enough to say, "I can't believe you just said that to my sister."

Harry smiled, "She's not yelling at me anymore is she?"

Ron grinned, "No, she isn't."

Hermione looked on disapprovingly, "Oh, Harry, please tell me that you didn't just say that to her to get her to quit yelling."

Harry shook his head, "No, Hermione, I didn't. I meant every word. Getting her to stop yelling at me was a bonus side effect. Although, I didn't intend for her to flee when I said it."

Hermione sniffed, "So, what happened at the station?"

Harry snorted, "I'm talking about something pleasant and you have to bring up the battle. You're no fun."

Ron jumped to Hermione's defense, "Well, mate, we are all curious as to what happened."

"Alright, I'll tell you. We expected there to be an attack on me in revenge for Diagon Alley. We knew their only chance of getting to me before I got back to Hogwarts was to hit us at King's Cross. So, we prepared for it. We won. End of story."

Luna spoke up, "No, that is not end of story. How did you get into the hospital wing?"

"Oh, that. I sort of jumped in front of an Explosion Hex that was aimed at Tonks." replied Harry.

Hermione looked horrified, "Harry, you could have been killed."

Ron and Neville looked impressed while Luna failed to show any reaction.

Harry shrugged, "I'm still here."

Hermione shook her head emphatically, "You can't take chances like that, Harry. How do you think all of us will feel if you get yourself killed?"

Harry smiled, “I’m not going to get myself killed, Hermione. I wasn’t taking a chance. I was doing what was necessary. Besides, I’ve had worse injuries falling off my broomstick. I’m sorry that all of you were worried, but it’s time that you understand that this is for keeps. I might die out there fighting Voldemort, but it’s a fight that I have to keep fighting.”

Ron broke in, “You need to let us help you.”

“No, Ron, I don’t. When all of you understand that some things are worth dying for. Then, you can go into battle. Not before.”

Hermione protested, “But we do understand that some things are worth dying for.”

Harry shook his head, “No, Hermione, you don’t. Your reaction to what I did today proves that beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“Then, how do we show you that we understand.” asked Ron.

“You won’t. I’ll just know. Then, I will ask the others to let you join the Order of the Phoenix. Until then, you have to stay on the bench. I hope that you can accept that.”

All of them nodded. “Now, onto happier matters. What did I miss at the feast? Who is the new Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher?”

Ron answered, “Good food. The normal announcements except for the ball, and Tonks is the new DADA teacher.”

“Tonks? Excellent! Ball?” echoed Harry.

Hermione nodded, “Yes, there is going to be a ball the day before term lets out for Christmas holidays.”

Harry smiled, “Good, we need to have some fun.”

Ron snorted, “I don’t know what you’re happy about, mate. Do you remember how much trouble we had getting dates to the last ball?”

Harry shrugged, “Yeah, but they say that the first time is always the hardest. We’ve got that out of the way. It should be simpler this time around. Anyway, I don’t understand what you’re complaining about, you have a girlfriend.”

Ron jumped, “No, I don’t.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, “You mean to tell me that after all those snogging sessions with Hermione this summer at my house, you still haven’t asked her to be your girlfriend?”

Ron and Hermione both flushed red when Harry said this. “Harry, how did you know about this?” stammered Hermione.

Harry snorted, “I know my house is pretty big, but it isn’t that big. Everyone that came through that house this summer knows that the two of you kept sneaking off to snog.”

Ron muttered, “Well, I think its time for Harry to get some rest. I think we should be going.” Neville and Luna both laughed at Ron and Hermione’s obvious discomfiture.

Harry grinned broadly, “Is there a problem, Ron?”

Ron, however, was saved from answering by Madam Pomfrey. “It’s time for all of you to go. Mr. Potter needs his rest.” She shoos them all from the wing. Then, she brought a tray of food over to Harry. “Here, you are. Eat, and then you need to try to sleep some more. I’m sure after sleeping all day you will wake early. I will let you go back to the tower in the morning.”

Harry replied as he dug into the tray of food, “Thanks, Madam Pomfrey.” She looked surprised considering that Harry had not argued with her at all.

8. Classes Begin

The next morning Harry awoke at dawn. He had a message lying on the counter beside him. It said, “The password to Gryffindor Tower is Phoenix Fire.” Harry smiled and began to change back into his clothes. When he was finished, Madam Pomfrey came over and informed him that he could leave to return to the tower. Harry walked through the castle. In the early morning hours it was practically deserted. Most of the paintings were asleep. Harry arrived at the painting of the Fat Lady and gave the password, “Phoenix Fire.” The portrait opened and Harry entered the common room. He walked up the stairs to the sixth year boys dormitory. None of the others were awake, yet. So, Harry rummaged in his trunk, and pulled out his robes. He then went to the bathroom and showered and then changed into his school robes. He grabbed a book on day to day charms that he had bought in Flourish and Blott’s and walked down to the common room. He sat on a couch in front of the fireplace and opened the book and began looking for a charm of some kind that would help him learn how to dance. He found a Dancing Charm that would train your feet how to move. “I’ll just have to find an empty room to practice in. I want this to be a surprise.” Harry muttered to himself.

“You want what to be a surprise?” inquired Hermione.

Harry jumped and quickly shut the book so that she wouldn’t see what he had been reading. “Nothing.”

She smirked, “Don’t give me that nothing line, Harry Potter. What are you hiding?”

Harry bit his lower lip, “If I tell you, you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Hermione nodded, “Okay, I promise.”

Harry shifted nervously, “Er, I decided that I was going to learn how to dance for the ball.”

“Why?”

“Well, I looked stupid last time. Besides I saw who the girl I want to ask went with last time. He stepped on her toes constantly, and I don’t want to do that.” Harry said.

“You wouldn’t happen to be talking about Ginny Weasley?” Hermione asked innocently.

Harry flushed slightly, “Er, well, I don’t know.”

“I thought you just said that you knew which girl you wanted to take.” Hermione persisted.

“I do, but that doesn’t mean that I’m going to tell you.” Harry muttered.

He was saved from any further questioning by Ron and Neville walking into the common room. “So, are the two of you ready for breakfast?” asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head, “Trust you to be worried about food.”

Ron replied, “I’m a growing boy.”

Harry said, “Hold on, I’ve got to go throw my book in my room, and I’ll be back down.” Harry ran up the stairs and then back down. When he walked back into the common room Ginny was waiting with the other three. She blushed faintly when she saw Harry. He smiled at her, “Let’s go to breakfast.”

The four of them walked down to the Great Hall, and sat down at the Gryffindor table. While they were serving themselves bacon and eggs, McGonagall walked down the length of the table and began handing out schedules. Harry opened his and a note fell out. He picked it up and opened it.

Harry,

Come up to my office this evening at eight o’clock. Professor McGonagall and I need to speak with you. The password is Acid Pops.

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster

“What’s the note for, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“It’s from Dumbledore. He wants to meet with me in his office tonight.” responded Harry.

“Why?” asked Ron.

“Doesn’t say. I’d bet it has something to do with Tom’s response to the attack on Platform 9 ¾.”

The others nodded. Hermione changed the subject, “So, Ginny, what do you think about the ball?”

Ginny smiled, “Well, at least this time I don’t have to wait on a boy to ask me. I already know I can go. I’m going to have to do a lot of altering to my dress robes. They don’t quite fit anymore.”

Hermione turned to Harry, “How about you?”

Harry shrugged, “I guess I’ll have to get new robes. I’ve grown at least six inches since I wore the ones I have. At least this time I don’t intend to make the same mistakes I did for the Yule Ball.”

“What mistakes were those, mate?” asked Ron.

Harry paused as if considering how to answer, “First, I waited way to late to finally ask. Second, I asked the wrong girl. I have no intention of doing either of those things this time. I’m going to ask early, and I’m going to ask the right girl.”

Neville asked nervously, “How soon are you going to ask? I don’t know when I should ask someone. I don’t want to ask too soon, but I don’t want to ask too late either.”

Harry grinned, “I think I’m going to ask the girl I want to go with, today.” He turned to Ginny, “So, Ginny, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the ball?”

Ron fell off the bench into the floor. Hermione and Neville gaped at Harry. Ginny flushed a very deep red and nodded shyly. Then, she bolted from the Great Hall. Harry shook his head in exasperation, “She has got to stop doing that.”

Hermione smiled, “You keep embarrassing her.”

“How does me asking her to the dance embarrass her?” asked Harry in bewilderment.

Ron got back into his seat, “Everything about you embarrasses her, mate.”

Harry leaned back over his plate of food, “Well we’re going to have to change that. To change the subject, how is everyone’s morning on classes?”

Ron smirked, “I’m off first period. The only thing I have on Mondays is Double Care of Magical Creatures this afternoon.”

Hermione said, “Well, I have Transfiguration at nine. How about you, Harry?”

“The same, then I have Double Potions this afternoon with Snape. How about you, Neville?”

“I’ve got Ancient Runes at nine, then I’ll be with Ron in Care of Magical Creatures this afternoon.”

Hermione turned, “I can’t believe I didn’t ask. Neville, How did you do on your O.W.L.’s?”

Neville smiled, “Pretty good actually. I got an O in Herbology and DADA. I got an E in Ancient Runes and Charms. A in Transfiguration, Divination, Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures. and History of Magic. I got a P in Potions.”

Harry jumped in, “That’s great, Neville. Which N.E.W.T.’s are you doing?”

“Care of Magical Creature, Charms, Herbology, Ancient Runes, and Defense Against the Dark Arts.” replied Neville.

Hermione nodded, “Good class schedule.”

Harry looked at his watch, “Well, Mione, we had better get going. I don’t think McGonagall would appreciate us being late on the first day of class.” Harry got up. “I guess we’ll see you guys at dinner. Let’s hurry.” The other two boys nodded as Harry and Hermione headed for Transfiguration.

The two hurried up to Gryffindor tower to get their books for Transfiguration. Then, they rushed to McGonagall’s room to get seats in the front. McGonagall swept into the room a few minutes later as the class settled themselves into their seats. “I would like to congratulate all of you on your O.W.L. results. I only accept those students who receive an E or O into my N.E.W.T. Transfiguration course. The main objective of the course this year will focus on various kinds of human transfiguration. We will begin small as this is exceedingly difficult. In deference to my animagus form, I would like all of you to try and transform your off hand into a cat paw.” She went on to describe the incantation and wand movements necessary for human transfiguration.

All of the students began attempting the transfiguration. There were some catastrophic effects. Harry waited until McGonagall’s attention was focused on Parvati, who had managed freeze her hand into a fist. Then, he waved his wand and pretended to perform the incantation, while merely transforming his hand into his animagus panther paw. Hermione happened to glance over from her work to notice Harry. “Harry, how did you do that?”

Professor McGonagall turned to see what Hermione was talking about. “Mr. Potter, I believe that is a panther paw.”

Harry nodded, “I believe you are right, Professor. Panthers are cats.”

The enormity of what Harry had just stated was not wasted on McGonagall. She gave him one of her rare smiles, “Twenty points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. Excellent work.” She moved off to begin helping the other students.

Hermione rounded on Harry, “Twenty points, Harry. That’s amazing to get that many in one shot from Professor McGonagall.”

He snorted, “Don’t act happy, yet. We have double Potions this afternoon. Snape can take twenty points away from me in a matter of minutes. I’ll just be happy to break even for the day.”

Hermione’s face fell, “Yeah, I guess you’re right. We can hope, though.”

Harry shrugged, “I suppose, but we had better get to work before McGonagall takes the points back herself.”

Hermione smiled and set back to work attempting the transfiguration. Harry made a mental note to practice the transfiguration in private to make sure he could do it without cheating. He waited until no one was looking and then reverted his hand. Soon enough the bell rang to signal the end of class. The students packed up their books to leave. “Mr. Potter, might I have a word with you?”

Harry looked at Hermione, “Library?” She nodded. “I’ll catch up with you there.” Harry walked up to Professor McGonagall’s desk, “Yes, Professor?” he inquired.

“Was that your first attempt at human transfiguration?” asked McGonagall.

“In a manner of speaking. It was my first attempt today.” said Harry meekly.

“How many times have you attempted human transfiguration?”

Harry shrugged, “Four, maybe five times.”

“Are you sure that is all?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, I’m sure. It was just a few times that I attempted it.”

“Well, Mr. Potter, I believe that will be all. I will speak with you again when you come to meet the Headmaster this evening.” said McGonagall.

Harry smiled, “I look forward to it, Professor.” Then, he turned and picked up his books and walked out of the room. A few minutes later, he caught up with Hermione in the library.

“So, what did Professor McGonagall want?” asked Hermione.

Harry grinned, “She wanted to talk about my transfiguration, and tell me that she would see me tonight in Dumbledore’s office.”

“What do you think..” began Hermione but Harry cut her off.

“Don’t bother to ask. I still have no idea what Dumbledore wants to talk to me about. I will find out tonight, and if it isn’t terribly confidential, then I will tell all of you about it later.”

“Well, let’s just study until lunch, then.” said Hermione.

Harry sat down beside Hermione and pulled out his Transfiguration textbook. He proceeded to begin reading about the theory behind human transfiguration, so that he could make sure that he could perform all kinds. Hermione buried herself in some obscure text that she had found on the shelf concerning human to animal transfiguration. They had been sitting there for about half an hour when Ron and Neville walked in. “Here you are. We’ve been looking all over the place for you.” moaned Ron.

Harry shook his head, “Considering I just had a class with Hermione, this should have been the first place you looked.”

Hermione socked Harry in the arm, “Hey.”

Harry shrugged, “You know its true. This is your sanctuary.” He turned to the other two, “Hermione’s motto, When in doubt, go to the library and read a book about it.” All three boys laughed at this. Hermione looked on disapprovingly.

Ron grinned, “Harry, you better watch out. Hermione looks ready to attack.”

“So. The worst she can do is hex me. I’m not the one trying to date her. I don’t have to worry about her being mad. You’re the one that’s going to suffer for it.” Harry looked pointedly at Ron, who flushed red at this statement.

Neville and Hermione laughed at Ron. Harry grinned, “See, she doesn’t stay upset. She knows that I’m just teasing her.”

Ron just shook his head, “Let’s go back up to the tower.”

Harry jumped up, “Yeah, I want a game of chess before lunch. Come on, Hermione. We can study after Potions. I’m sure Snape will give us plenty of homework.”

Hermione smiled ruefully, and got up to follow the boys up to Gryffindor tower. They walked upstairs to the Fat Lady, and gave her the password, “Phoenix Fire.” Then, they walked into the common room to find Ginny sitting in front of the fire. She looked up and saw Harry. She immediately began to blush furiously. Harry smiled and shook his head, “Hi, Ginny.”

She smiled, “Hi, Harry.” Then, she giggled. Hermione smiled at the obvious flirtation. Ron just rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Harry. Let’s play chess.” said Ron as he pulled out the chess set.

Harry said, “Alright. Ginny, do you want to watch me lose horribly?”

Ginny shook her head, “No, but I’d love to help you win.”

Harry grinned, “I could get used to that idea. God knows you’re better than me.”

Ron looked up, “How do you know Ginny is better than you?”

Harry chuckled, “She beat me easily enough when we played this summer.”

Ron’s eyes widened, “You played chess with my sister this summer.”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, is there something wrong with that?”

Ron shook his head, “No, but I didn’t know that the two of you played games together.”

Ginny spoke up, “Harry and I did a lot of stuff together this summer.” Then, she blushed profusely as she realized the implication of what she had just said.

Hermione looked at Ginny coyly, “Oh really. Exactly what did the two of you do together this summer?”

Harry looked at Hermione, “From what I’ve heard, Ginny and I have done a great deal less than you and Ron.”

Ron asked quickly, “What is that supposed to mean?”

Harry looked exasperated, “Ron, how many times do we have to go over the fact that we all know that you and Hermione were caught snogging on more than one occasion at my house this summer?”

Ron and Hermione blushed. “So, Ron, have you asked her to be your girlfriend?”

Ron shook his head. Harry pulled out his wand, “Do I have to hex you to make you do it?”

Hermione jumped up, “What is this? Do you think that I need you to force him to ask me out? I don’t need charity.”

Harry laughed at her, “I know you don’t need any charity, Hermione. Its not like I’m trying to get him to do something he doesn’t want to do already. I think I need to change tactics.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Hermione hotly.

Harry grinned, “Maybe instead of trying to talk the boy wonder over here into asking you out, maybe I should be threatening to hex you if you don’t ask him out.”

Hermione stopped and stared at Harry with her mouth open in astonishment. Ginny and Neville laughed at her and Ron. Harry just shook his head, “The two of you are entirely too easy to wind up. Come on, Ron, let’s just play a game.”

The five students sat around and joked as Ron and Harry played a game of wizard’s chess. Ginny occasionally gave Harry advice about what moves to make. Harry unconsciously reached out and took Ginny’s hand. She flushed with pleasure and looked for one minute as if she was going to bolt again, but Hermione gave her a knowing smile and she relaxed. After Harry had managed to lose the game, he stood up. “Alright, then, its time to go eat lunch. I’ve been humiliated enough for the day already, and I still have to deal with Snape in double potions this afternoon.”

Ginny got up beside him, “Harry, Snape can’t be that horrible to you, can he?”

Harry smirked, “Are you kidding me? He already hated me before. After what happened the last time we spoke to each other, he’s going to be even worse.”

Ginny nodded, “Good point.” The two of them began walking to the portrait hole still holding hands. The other three exchanged bemused glances at their expense and then grinned and followed the two of them down to the Great Hall.

On the way down the stairs in the main corridor they all heard a voice ring out, “You’ve got to be kidding me, Potter. You’ve taken to the weasel’s little sister. Did you buy her or something?”

“Malfoy.” growled Harry. He let go of Ginny’s hand and took two running steps and vaulted the banister and seemingly flew through the air to land beside Malfoy. Somewhere in the jump he had drawn his wand, and now had it leveled at the bridge of Malfoy’s nose. “Now, I want you to notice how easy it was for me to get to you. The next time I come after you, Madam Pomfrey will be mopping up what is left of you. Do I make myself clear, Malfoy?”

Malfoy made a motion as if he was going to go for his wand, but Harry was quicker. His left hand shot out and grabbed Malfoy’s arm and bent it around backwards. He leaned closer to Malfoy and whispered menacingly, “I’ve warned you, Malfoy. The next time you cross me, I will treat you as a Death Eater. There will be no mercy. Remember my words “ He pushed Malfoy away and pocketed his wand, and walked back to his friends. He smiled down at Ginny, “Let’s go get lunch.” The other four followed him into the Great Hall, each one of them smirking at Malfoy as they passed.

Lunch was a lighthearted affair of banter being exchanged between the five. However, all too soon it was time to return to class. Harry stood up wearily, "Come on, Mione. Its time for us to go and grab our potions stuff, and prepare for the torture."

Hermione grinned as she stood up, "Maybe it won't be that bad."

Harry looked at her skeptically. She shrugged, "Okay, maybe it will."

He turned and looked down at Ginny, "You have any homework yet?" She nodded. "Do you want to meet in the common room later and work on it together?" She nodded again. "Okay, I'll see you after class." She smiled as he turned to walk away.

Harry and Hermione made their way to Gryffindor tower. They retrieved their cauldrons and potion kits and then headed towards the dungeons. They arrived outside of the Potions classroom to discover only four other students. Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff, Draco Malfoy, and Blaise Zabini from Slytherin, and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw. Harry looked around, "Is this all of us?"

Padma nodded, "There were only seven O's on the Potions O.W.L."

Harry looked around bewildered, "Who was the other one?"

Padma answered, "Terry Boot, but he wants to be a Charm Breaker. He doesn't need potions."

At this moment the door to the dungeon burst open and Snape swept into the hallway and ordered them into the classroom. He strode to the front of the class and spun around to glare malevolently at the four non-Slytherin's in the room. "Since you are present in this class, you have obviously managed an O on the Potions O.W.L. This will not help you in my N.E.W.T. course on Potions. We will be doing very advanced potions in this class. I expect anyone that takes this class to perform admirably on the Potions N.E.W.T. that you will take at the end of your seventh year. Anyone that I do not feel is performing up to standard will be removed from my roll. There will be no playing around in this class. Is this understood?"

The class chorused, "Yes, Professor Snape."

"Now, that I have your attention, we will be brewing a potion known as the Polyjuice Potion. This potion allows the drinker to assume the form of another person. What is the most important ingredient of Polyjuice Potion, Mr. Potter?"

"You must have a part of the person that you wish to transform into, Professor." answered Harry.

Snape looked surprised but recovered quickly. "You will be working in groups of two this term. You will use one of the two cauldrons in your group for the Polyjuice Potion. You will use the other one for the other potions that we will be brewing this term. The Polyjuice Potion takes almost a month to brew, so we will be preparing the ingredients today and setting the lacewings to stew." He turned and began writing the ingredients on the board. Harry and Hermione grinned at each other and began unpacking the ingredients they needed. Two hours later the bell rang to end class. Harry and Hermione were packing up their things when Snape called out, "I want three rolls of parchment on the magically induced effects of boomslang skin on potions. Due Friday. Dismissed."

Harry and Hermione quickly left class, and headed up to Gryffindor Tower. The two of them walked in to the tower to find Ginny sitting at a table in the corner with her charms book out. Harry leaned over her and asked, "What are you doing?"

"My homework."

"I can see that. What is the assignment on?" asked Harry impatiently.

"Charms."

"Are you trying to be a pain?"

She nodded enthusiastically, "Yes."

Harry laughed, "You're very good at it."

She smacked his arm playfully, "Hey, that's not fair."

Harry held up his hands in mock surrender, "I only speak the truth as I see it."

Hermione laughed at Ginny and Harry. While she was laughing at them Neville and Ron came in through the portrait hole. "What's so funny?" they asked simultaneously.

Hermione nodded at Harry and Ginny, "Those two arguing about Ginny's homework."

Ron raised his eyebrows, "What's funny about that?"

Hermione waved him off, "You had to be here. It's time to start our homework, though."

Ron grinned hugely, "I don't have any."

Harry looked at him, "Like that's something to brag about. You've only had one class. How about you, Neville?"

He replied, "I've got a short translation for Ancient Runes. How much work did Snape give you?"

Harry moaned, "Three rolls of parchment on boomslang skin. I have to lay down for a few minutes before I even think about starting that." Harry laid down on the floor beside the table and happened to turn his head towards Ginny and saw a very familiar pair of mismatched socks on her feet. One of them was red with a pattern of broomsticks, while the other was green with a pattern of Snitches. "Ginny."

"Yes, Harry."

"Why are you wearing my socks?" asked Harry.

Ginny blushed, "I found them in your trunk and I thought they were cute."

"When?"

"Over the summer."

"Why were you going through my trunk?" persisted Harry.

"Well," stammered Ginny. "I was looking for some of your socks."

"Why?"

"Ummm.."

Ron cut her off, "Don't worry about it, mate. She steals everyone's socks. She has some of mine, Bill's, Charlie's, Percy's, Fred's, and George's. I don't think that I have ever seen her wear a pair of her own socks."

Harry snorted with suppressed laughter, "Well, Ginny, if you want my socks that bad, you just have to ask. However, I do want that pair back at some point. They were a Christmas present from Dobby two years ago. He'd be highly upset if he knew that I had given them away. So, I'm afraid you're going to have to choose a different pair of my socks to take unless you want a very excitable house elf calling you My Wheazy."

Hermione looked at Harry, "Your what?"

Harry laughed, "My Wheazy. That's what he called Ron during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. Dobby was the one that told me what they had taken."

Ron looked disgusted, "He called me your Wheazy?"

Harry really began to laugh at the expression on Ron's face, "Yes, he did. Several times actually." The others joined Harry in his laughter. Harry finally got up off the floor and pulled out his potions homework and set to work. All of the others but Ron did the same.

Ron stood up and said, "I'm going to go for a walk." Everyone waved and set back to work. He headed out the portrait hole. The others continued with their homework, occasionally making comments. Ginny and Neville finished first and went upstairs to the dormitories. Harry and Hermione continued working diligently. They had just finished when Ron came back in. "Hey, guys, you know its about time for dinner."

Harry stood and stretched, "Yes, Ron, we're done. I'm going to go chunk my stuff in the dorm room. I'll be back in a sec." He rushed upstairs to get rid of his books, and then hurried back down the stairs. Ron and Neville were standing waiting for him. He looked around, "Where are the girls?"

Ron shrugged, "Hermione went upstairs and said she'd be back in a bit. She told us not to wait. She said her and Ginny would meet us in the Great Hall."

Harry nodded, "Alright, then. Let's head to dinner." After that the three boys left the tower to make their way down to the Great Hall.

Hermione had walked upstairs to her dorm room, and heard a hiss from the fifth year girls dorm. "Hermione." She turned and looked to see Ginny motioning for her to come.

"What is it, Ginny?" asked Hermione in amusement.

"Am I crazy, Hermione?" Ginny moaned.

"What are you talking about?" asked Hermione in bewilderment.

Ginny squirmed, "Am I imagining things or has Harry been flirting with me?"

Hermione smiled, "Well, Ginny, I'm no expert, but I would have to say that he has been. He did tell you that you were beautiful."

Ginny flushed, "Oh, I'm sure he just said all that in the hospital wing to get me to stop yelling at him."

Hermione shook her head, "No, he said that was just a bonus."

"What was just a bonus?"

Hermione laughed, "He said after you ran out, that he meant every word of what he said. Then, he said the fact that you stopped yelling at him was just a bonus side effect of the compliment. He asked you to go to the Ball. He said you were the right girl. It all sounds like flirting with me."

Ginny sighed, "Then, why hasn't he asked me to be his girlfriend or something?"

Hermione shrugged, "I ask myself the same question about Ron."

"At least he's kissed you." Ginny complained.

Hermione looked surprised, "You mean that the two of you haven't kissed yet?"

Ginny shook her head. "He hasn't even tried to kiss me."

"Don't take it the wrong way. The only girl that Harry has really liked before you was Cho, and that was somewhat of a disaster. I think he's just trying to take it slow. Be patient. He'll come around."

"I'm tired of being patient. I've been waiting for Harry to notice me for five years now. Its getting tiring." complained Ginny some more.

Hermione shrugged, "Well, you know what to do about that."

Ginny shook her head, "What?"

"Make the first move."

Ginny looked almost scared, "I couldn't. I can barely speak in front of him. There's no way I could actually make a move on him."

"Then, just wait on him then. Let's go down to eat." The two girls followed the same route that the boys had taken just minutes before on their way to the Great Hall.

Dinner passed by in a blur as Harry began to wonder more and more about what Dumbledore wished to speak with him about. After they had finished eating the five teenagers left the Great Hall. Harry stopped in the corridor and said, "I'll catch up with all of you in the common room. I'm going to go ahead and go to Dumbledore's office. Its almost eight o'clock. See ya later."

They waved as Harry took off in the opposite direction. They then finished making their way through the castle to Gryffindor tower. Harry came to a halt in front of the gargoyle that marked the entrance to Dumbledore's office. "Acid Pops." The gargoyle sprang to one side and Harry made his way up the revolving staircase to the door of Dumbledore's office. He knocked on the door.

"Come in, Harry." rang out the voice of the Headmaster. Harry walked into the office and looked around. The office was basically the same as it had always been. Knickknacks galore abounded through the room. Fawkes was on his customary perch. Harry took the seat that Dumbledore pointed to. "I presume you are wondering why I have asked you here this evening, Harry."

"Yes, sir." Professor McGonagall bustled in just then.

"Ah, Minerva, you are just in time." said Dumbledore. "I was just about to explain to young Mr. Potter, why I have called him here this evening." McGonagall nodded and sat down. Dumbledore turned back to Harry. "Harry, I wish to ask you about the D.A."

"What about it, sir?" inquired Harry.

"Would you like to continue the club?" continued Dumbledore.

Harry shrugged, "It was a lot of fun doing the D.A. meetings, but I don't really see that we need it anymore, now that we have a decent Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I'm sure Professor Tonks is going to be able to handle it."

Albus smiled, "Yes, I'm sure she can. However, I was thinking of transforming the D.A. into a Dueling Club under your leadership, Harry."

"If you think that I can handle it, sir, I would love to do it." answered Harry.

"Excellent. Now speaking of transforming, Minerva has given me to understand that you have demonstrated an innate ability at human transfiguration."

Harry shrugged, "I suppose."

"She believes, as I do, that you would benefit from Animagus training. Unfortunately, if you were to take up this training, it would mean certain sacrifices on your part." said Dumbledore.

Harry's face fell, "You want me to give up Quidditch."

McGonagall interrupted, "Not entirely, Mr. Potter. It had been my intent to offer you the captaincy of the team this evening. In light of your natural ability, I believe that your time would be better spent on Animagus training than captain's duties. You would still be able to remain on the team, though."

Harry smiled, "How long would it take to complete the training?"

McGonagall answered, "If you pressed hard, I believe that you could achieve the full transformation by the end of May."

Harry shook his head, "I would like to be Quidditch captain, Professor. I don't think that I need to worry about Animagus training. It isn't that difficult to accomplish."

McGonagall replied sternly, "I am somewhat disappointed in you, Mr. Potter. I expected better. I assure you that the transformation is most difficult."

"I beg to differ, Professor. I worked it out in a single afternoon." responded Harry.

Dumbledore started, "What was that, Harry?"

"I said that I worked out how to do the transformation in a single afternoon." repeated Harry.

McGonagall shook her head, "Are you saying that you are already an Animagus?"

Harry nodded as Dumbledore's eyes began to twinkle. She continued, "I find that difficult to believe, Mr. Potter."

Harry stood up and transformed into a black panther. McGonagall leaped back in shock, but Dumbledore merely chuckled appreciatively. Harry reverted to human form as Fawkes trilled
Impressive, young one.

Harry turned and smiled, "Why thank you, Fawkes."

Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged glances, but didn't say anything. Dumbledore spoke up, "Harry, how long have you been able to do this?"

"About three or four weeks." responded Harry.

"Why haven't you already told us about it?" inquired Dumbledore.

Harry looked sheepish, "Sorry, Professor, but you always seem to know everything that is going on in the castle. I couldn't resist finally getting a chance to surprise you. I don't know many people that can say they have done so."

Fawkes trilled again *Even I don't know many people that have done so*

Harry laughed, "That's good, Fawkes."

You understand me, young one

Harry nodded, "Of course I do."

McGonagall interrupted, "Harry, are you speaking to Fawkes?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Harry, that is impossible. No witch or wizard has ever had the ability to understand phoenix song," protested McGonagall.

Harry smiled, "Then, I am proud to say that I am the first."

Dumbledore shook his head, "You don't understand, Harry. Its not an ability that has ever been recorded in wizarding history."

Harry ran his hand through his hair, "There's a reason for that. I've looked through the Animagus lists in the library. Only one person has ever had an Animagus form that was a magical creature."

McGonagall interrupted, "Godric Gryffindor could transform into a Griffin. This is known to us, Potter."

"I realize that, Professor. One of the byproducts of transforming into a magical creature is that you learn their language. My animagus form is a phoenix," stated Harry.

McGonagall protested yet again, "Harry, you have already shown us that your animagus form is a panther. How can it be a phoenix?"

Harry smiled, "I have shown you one of my Animagus forms." Harry paused to let the enormity of that statement sink in.

McGonagall paled, and the twinkle disappeared from Dumbledore's eyes as his mouth fell open in shock. McGonagall finally found her voice and muttered. "Impossible."

Harry smiled again, "I assure you, Professor, that it is not." Harry then proceeded to transform into a magnificent golden phoenix. He trilled at Fawkes, and then Fawkes trilled back. Harry then reverted to human state.

Dumbledore leaned forward and swallowed carefully, "Harry, you do realize that what you just did has never been done before?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, Professor Dumbledore, I do realize that. I'm not the Child of the Prophecy for nothing."

McGonagall asked, "Do you have any more forms?"

Harry shook his head, "Not yet. I'm working on it though. It gets harder with each transformation that I add."

Her eyes widened, "You mean that you think that you can add another form."

Harry nodded, "Give me another two or three weeks, and I should have it."

Dumbledore smiled weakly, "Minerva, I believe this answers the question about Gryffindor's Quidditch Captain."

She nodded, "Yes, I believe it does."

Dumbledore turned back to Harry, "Harry, what nights would you like to run the dueling club?"

Harry pondered for a moment, "I think that twice a week should be plenty. How about Mondays and Thursdays. We could meet at 5:30 in the dueling chamber. That would give us plenty of time before dinner. We can put notices up in the common rooms, and start this Thursday."

Dumbledore nodded, "I will see that the notices are drafted and posted. Unless you have something else with which to shock myself and Professor McGonagall with, you may return to your common room."

Harry shook his head, "I'm sure there are other things that I could tell you, but I believe that you have bitten off as much as you need for the day. I'll see you both at breakfast in the morning. Night."

Harry made his way back to Gryffindor tower, deep in thought. He had just had a lot of new responsibility thrust upon him. Although, if he was honest with himself, he rather liked the idea of being in charge of the dueling club. He climbed through the portrait hole to find the others waiting for him.

Hermione and Ron jumped up, "Well, what did he want?" they chorused.

Harry shrugged, "I'm not really ready to talk about it right now. I promise I will tell you about it tomorrow."

Ginny looked concerned, "Harry, are you okay?"

Harry smiled at her and winked, "Yeah, I'm alright. I just have a lot to think about. I'm going to go to bed."

Ginny asked, "Is it bad?"

Harry shook his head, "No, its good, but just a slight bit overwhelming. Good night." Harry walked up the stairs to the boys dormitory.

The other four exchanged glances, and then sat back down to chat for a while longer before bed.

Later that night Harry awoke to the sounds of the other four boys sleeping. He got up quietly and pulled on his dressing gown and walked down to the common room. He sat down in front of the fire and began to muse out loud, "I have to teach a dueling club. I need to know some things that would help me. I guess its time to see what I can find in Tom's head." He settled and relaxed his own consciousness to tap into Voldemort's brain. As he searched through looking for information, he came across something interesting. Voldemort was apparently an excellent swordsman. Harry figured that this would be something interesting for the dueling club at some point, so he began to process the different forms and exercises that went along with sword fighting.

While Harry was occupied downstairs, Ginny lay in bed restless. She had been completely unable to sleep. All the events of the last two days kept replaying in her mind. Yesterday, filled with worry that Harry had been hurt. The enormous relief she felt when she discovered that he was alright. The amazement and embarrassment, not to mention pure joy that overwhelmed her when she had actually heard Harry speak the words proclaiming that she was beautiful. Her utter disbelief when Harry had asked her to go to the ball this morning. She spent the entire day expecting to wake up and discover it was a dream. Now, she was loathe to go to sleep for fear that when she woke up in the morning that it would have been just that. She sighed, "I need to go for a walk. Maybe that will help me sleep." So, she got up and slid into her dressing gown, and headed down to the common room. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw Harry floating again. "Harry," she said gently.

Before she could have even blinked, Harry had leaped forward and then tucked himself into a roll that brought him up right in front of her with his wand held at her throat. He stopped as Ginny's face came into focus. He quickly put away his wand, and then reached out to draw Ginny into a hug. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. You startled me."

Ginny pulled back from his arms and looked him in the face, "Why are you so jumpy, Harry?"

Harry grinned sheepishly, "I'm usually not that bad, but when I'm rifling through Voldemort's brain, I tend to be on edge."

Ginny nodded, "I guess that's understandable. Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course. I'm just not promising that I'll answer it."

"What would have happened just now if I had been a threat."

Harry shifted nervously and removed his arms from around Ginny completely, "I would have been hurling hexes before I had even completed getting up from the roll."

Ginny walked over and sat down on the couch heavily, "Oh."

Harry sat down beside her, "Don't worry, Ginny. I've got really good reflexes. I might scare you now and again when you startle me from meditating, but I would never hurt you. You know that."

Ginny turned and smiled, "I do. Why were you down here? Couldn't sleep?"

Harry shrugged, "Basically, I had a lot on my mind from what Dumbledore told me earlier. I just wanted to sit and think about it. I decided as long as I was awake, I might as well pilfer Tom's mind for anything useful to help me."

Ginny stood up, "Oh, well, if you want to be alone, I will go back to bed."

Harry reached out quickly and snatched Ginny's hand, "Don't go."

Ginny turned back around and said, "Okay, if you want me to stay, I will." She sat back down on the couch beside Harry. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry smiled, "If you don't mind. Do you remember, back in your first year, the dueling club that Lockhart started?"

Ginny nodded, "Of course."

"Dumbledore wants to start it up again to replace the D.A." continued Harry.

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, "That would be great as long as someone good is teaching it. Is Tonks going to be running it?" Harry shook his head. Ginny moaned, "Tell me its not Snape!"

Harry grinned, "No, its not Snape."

"Then who is it?" squealed Ginny.

"You're sitting next to him on the couch." Harry commented dryly.

Ginny looked confused for a moment, then comprehension dawned on her face. "That's amazing, Harry. You'll be the best teacher ever."

Harry snorted, "Don't you think that you are just a little bit biased considering you're my date to the ball?"

Ginny shook her head, "No, I'm biased because I'm in love with you." Ginny froze as she realized what had just come out of her mouth. She attempted to run from the room, but Harry was too fast for her. He caught her by the waist and pulled her back down onto the couch. He pinned her arms down so that she couldn't get away.

"That's enough, Ginny. I'm tired of you running away from me all the time. Everyone in this school basically knows that you have feelings for me. Its nothing for you to be embarrassed about. Instead of running for a change, why don't you actually try talking about it with me?" Harry said. Then, he let go of her and waited to see if she would try to run again. She didn't.

"Harry, its hard to try to talk about something like this to someone who doesn't feel the same way.." she broke off as Harry grabbed her and pulled her into his lap. He ran one of his hands back along her cheek and then into her hair. He smiled and then leaned in towards Ginny and planted a kiss right on her mouth. She almost jumped up in surprise, but then wrapped her arms around Harry's shoulder and kissed him right back.

A moment later the two of them broke apart. Harry looked into Ginny's chocolate brown eyes and smiled, "Ginny, I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Ginny asked confused.

Harry leaned in towards her again and whispered, "For not doing this a long time ago." Then, he kissed her again.

9. The Dueling Club

The next morning the five teenagers awoke and met in the common room to head down to the Great Hall for breakfast. They stopped for a moment to look at the bulletin board, because of the large sign proclaiming the start of a dueling club. Ron looked excited, “Maybe it will be alright this time. I wonder who they got to run it?”

Harry grinned sheepishly, “Guilty.”

Ron, Hermione, and Neville looked shocked, while Ginny just laughed. Harry shrugged, “That’s one of things that Dumbledore wanted to talk to me about last night.”

Even Ginny looked surprised at this, “One of the things?” she echoed.

Harry nodded, “Yeah, I’m Quidditch Captain.”

Ginny grabbed him in a hug, “That’s great, Harry.”

Hermione and Ron congratulated him as well. Ron appeared to be completely overwhelmed. Hermione slapped him on the arm. He spoke up quickly, “Sorry, mate, I zoned out there. Congratulations.”

Harry grinned, “Thanks, guys.” He turned to Hermione, “Do you think you could do me a favor?”

She nodded, “I guess.”

Harry sighed in relief, “Good. I need to make a bulletin to announce Quidditch tryouts next Friday, and my handwriting is really bad, so I was hoping that you would do it?”

Hermione smiled, “Of course, silly.” The five of them walked out the portrait hole towards the Great Hall chattering excitedly about the dueling club.

Once they had sat down at the Gryffindor table, Harry asked the million galleon question. “So, Ron, have you asked Hermione to be your girlfriend yet?”

Ron flushed, “No.”

Harry shook his head, “Well, mate, you had better hurry up. Someone else might come along and snap her up. Hermione is in pretty high demand, you know.”

Ron flushed even deeper, “You’re one to talk, Harry. You don’t have a girlfriend either.”

Harry looked as if he were thinking for a minute, “You know you’re right, Ron. I don’t have a girlfriend.” He turned to Ginny, “Do you want to help me rectify that problem?”

“What?” she replied.

“Ron just told me that I didn’t have a girlfriend. I am saying that I would be honored if you wanted the job.” grinned Harry cheekily.

“Job?” echoed Ginny.

Harry nodded emphatically, “Definitely a job. Putting up with me is a full time job. Unfortunately, it only pays with hugs and kisses. For some reason, I can’t seem to get any volunteers.”

Ginny laughed, “So you’re asking me to be your girlfriend, Mr. Potter?”

Harry smiled, “Yes, Miss Weasley, I would be so happy if you were to consent to be my girlfriend that I would be tempted to say something nice about Snape and Malfoy in the same sentence.”

Ron and Neville looked dumbfounded, while Hermione just smiled. Ginny sat in shock at this pronouncement. Harry leaned forward, “Well?”

Ginny smiled, “Of course. I love you, Harry Potter.”

Harry took her hand in his, “And I love you, Virginia Weasley.” Now, even Hermione looked dumbfounded. As far as Ginny was concerned, none of them existed. There was no one else in the world. She had just heard the most wonderful words in the world. She had been waiting her entire life for this moment. Harry Potter was in love with her. Not much was said for the rest of breakfast. It was quickly time to head to the morning classes. The four sixth years got up from the table to head for Double Charms, and Harry leaned over and pecked Ginny lightly on the cheek, “I’ll see you at lunch.”

Ginny smiled, “Yes, Mr. Potter, you will.”

As Harry caught up to the other three on their way out of the Great Hall, Ron looked at Harry and shook his head in mock disgust, “The idea of you kissing my sister is going to take a lot of adjustment.”

Harry grinned, “Well, I suggest that you get started with whatever adjusting you need to do, Ron, because Ginny couldn’t get rid of me now if she beat me with a stick.”

Hermione looked at Harry as if he had lost his mind, “What has happened to you, Harry? You’ve never been the type to be affectionate like this. It’s weird.”

Harry chuckled lightly, “I’ve never had such a good reason.”

Hermione smiled, “You’re really in love with her, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, Hermione, I am. Now, let’s get to class. I would like to have a few secrets left at the end of the day.” After that they walked the rest of the way to Charms in silence.

The morning class passed quickly as they were having a practical lesson dealing with Conjuring. This was extremely difficult for everyone, even Harry and Hermione. They were attempting to conjure sewing needles. Only Harry, Hermione, and surprisingly Neville were able to accomplish this task.

Once class was over, the four students made their way back to the Great Hall for lunch. Harry smiled and sat down beside Ginny leaving Ron, Neville, and Hermione to sit across from them. They discussed their morning classes. Then, Harry consulted his timetable, “Ha.” he exclaimed.

The others jumped in surprise, “What is it?” they chorused.

Harry grinned sheepishly, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s just that we finally get to go to DADA after lunch. I haven’t spoken to Tonks since I’ve been here. I was a little excited. I need to talk about the dueling club with her. Professor Dumbledore told me that she was going to observe, and help me keep order.”

Ron looked up from his food again, “Are you going to be like a teacher when you’re doing the dueling club?”

Harry nodded, “I have to. If I want to make sure that people are going to pay attention, I have to act as if I am in charge. That means I have to conduct myself properly in the club. Once class is over, however, I get to go back to being a student.”

Ginny smiled and laid her hand on Harry’s arm, “Don’t worry about it. You’re going to be fine.”

Harry winked at her, “I know, but I still want to talk to Tonks beforehand. I have to plan what we’re going to do at the first meeting. I want to start it off with a bang.”

The five of them ate quickly and then practically ran to the dormitory to get their books for the afternoon lesson. Harry kissed Ginny goodbye at the portrait and headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts corridor. They walked into the classroom to discover that they were the first to arrive, but that Tonks was already sitting at her desk. She looked up and saw Harry. She jumped up and ran across the room, and swept Harry into a hug that Mrs. Weasley would have envied. “Harry Potter, if I weren’t so glad that you were actually alive, I would kill you. If you ever jump in front of an Avada Kedavra curse like that again, you had better hope it hits you, because if you live I’m going to strangle you.”

Hermione looked at Harry accusingly, “You didn’t tell us that you were almost hit by Avada Kedavra.”

Harry shrugged unconcernedly, “Imagine how I forgot to mention that. Or why I forgot to mention that.” he looked pointedly at Hermione until she turned away with a tear trickling down her face.

“I just don’t want to see you hurt.” she said as her voice shook. Neville and Ron nodded in agreement.

“I know, Hermione, but I wasn’t in any danger of getting killed. As far as getting hurt is concerned, I’m not going to experience anything new after having Voldemort hit me with the Cruciatus Curse twice, while I was in that graveyard the night Cedric died.”

The others winced as Harry said Voldemort’s name, but Tonks spoke up, “Harry, just because you’ve experienced a lot of pain before doesn’t mean that you have to throw yourself in harm’s way.”

Harry nodded, “Yes, Tonks, you’re right. However, if I hadn’t thrown myself in harm’s way, as you put it, you would be dead right now. I think that the risk was justified. As you can see, I’m still here. Its not as if the Avada Kedavra spell could have killed me anyway.”

Ron looked bewildered, “What are you talking about? It’s the Killing Curse. Of course it would have killed you.”

Harry pulled his hair up to reveal his scar, “It did a real good job last time didn’t it. Its supposed to be impossible to block or survive Avada Kedavra. I’ve done both, and that was up against the most powerful Dark Lord of the era. I’m not worried about any spell that his pathetic Death Eaters hurl at me. I will handle what is necessary for me to handle. It would do the rest of you a lot of good to stop worrying about things that you can’t change. It doesn’t accomplish anything.”

“But, Harry…”

Harry interrupted Hermione, “Don’t but Harry, me, Hermione. It doesn’t do any good to worry about things that you can’t change. I’m still here, and that’s all that matters. If something happens to me later, it will happen. There’s nothing that can be done about it right now.”

The others nodded to show that they understood, and they were going to drop the subject, but the expressions on their faces clearly showed that they were less than happy about the idea.

Harry turned to Tonks, “If you are free after class, I would really like to talk to you about the dueling club.”

Tonks nodded, “That will be fine, Harry. Dumbledore told me about it a few weeks ago. I expected him to drop the idea on you at the last minute so that you couldn’t say no. So, I came up with a few ideas for us.”

Harry grinned, “Good, I expect I’m going to need all the help I can get.” They broke off their conversation as the other students filed into class. Harry and the other took their seats at the front of the class.

Tonks stood in front of her desk and addressed the class, “I am Professor Tonks. Since I am the sixth Defense Against the Dark Arts professor that you have had, I intend to begin the term by reviewing a selection of things that you should have already been exposed to. Some of the things we will do, you have already done. Others were skipped due to inadequate teachers. We’re going to begin with the Shield Charm. I assume you have all had some experience with this charm. It will stop most minor jinxes and hexes. Once I am sure that everyone has firm control of this shield, then we will begin studying more advanced levels of hex deflection and reflection. Everyone, pair off.”

Harry and Neville paired, while Ron and Hermione squared off against each other. They took turns practicing the Shield Charm, while the other one hurled hexes such as Jelly Legs and the Tickling Charm at the shield. There were many hexes that had to be reversed through the course of the class. Before any of them knew it, however, the class was over and the bell was ringing.

Tonks stepped up to the front of the class, “Excellent work, all of you. I want twelve inches of parchment on the various hexes that can be deflected with the basic Shield Charm by Friday morning.”

The class groaned slightly at the homework, but began packing their things up to leave. Harry walked up to Tonks with the others following closely behind. He turned to look at them, “You guys go on ahead, I want to talk to Tonks alone.”

Ron complained, “We want to hear what you are going to do in the Dueling Club.”

Harry shook his head, “If you knew about it ahead of time, then it wouldn’t be a surprise. You’ll just have to wait until Thursday. Now, go on, shoo.” Harry motioned for them to leave. “Oh, by the way, if you see Ginny in the common room, tell her that I will be up in just a little while.”

The other three grinned, “Of course, we’ll tell her.” smirked Ron. “We’ll also tell her that the reason you’re late is because you were talking to another girl.”

Tonks grinned, “Oh, so I’m just another girl now.”

Harry waved his hand, “Be my guest. You’re welcome to tell her whatever you want to. I wouldn’t want to be the one on the bad end of her temper when she finds out you lied to her.”

Ron paled, “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll tell her that you’re talking with a professor.”

Harry smiled knowingly, “Good choice. I’ll see you later.” Then, he turned to Tonks, “I guess we need to discuss how we want this to go.”

She sat down, “I guess that we do.”

Harry started off, “I want the first meeting to be exciting, so what I was thinking was that we could have a few exhibition duels. We’d obviously have to put a limit on the spells that could be used.”

Tonks nodded, “Who did you have in mind for the exhibitions?”

Harry shrugged, “I don’t know. It all depends on who shows up. I was thinking that we definitely need to have Ron and Hermione face each other. I figured that I could ask for a volunteer to face me. After that I figured on pairing off a few of the DA members. I’m sure most of them will be there.”

“I guess that would work. Any ideas on the course of the class?” she asked.

“Yeah, actually. I want to go over a lot of attack hexes and have them practice them. I’ll have them use the hexes on me. I would rather not have to send a lot of my students to the hospital wing. I figure Madam Pomfrey’s so used to having me in there that she wouldn’t complain too much.”

Tonks laughed, “At least you’re candid about it.”

Harry grinned, “I suppose. Well, I guess that covers what we needed to go over. I better get up to Gryffindor Tower.”

Tonks smiled, “Yes, I’m sure you don’t want to keep Ginny waiting.”

Harry blushed, “I’m sure that I don’t. Not to mention that I have a lot of homework from my Defense teacher that I need to get done.”

“Go on. Have some fun.” smirked Tonks.

Harry grinned, “I intend to.” Harry left the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with a smile on his face and a spring in his step as he headed for Gryffindor Tower.

A couple of hours later, after everyone’s homework was done except for Ginny’s, Neville and Ron were playing a game of Wizard’s chess while Hermione sat in her chair reading a book and occasionally glancing at the two boys. Harry was sitting next to Ginny helping her with her Charms homework. Hermione made a comment, and Ron snapped something back. Before long the two were involved in a full scale argument.

Harry leaned in and whispered to Ginny, “Do you want to take a little break, and go for a walk? The afternoon classes are all over by now. We could go visit Hagrid.”

Ginny smiled and giggled very quietly, “It will also get us away from those two.”

Harry grinned, “Okay, you caught me. Let’s sneak out.”

Ginny nodded, and the two of them quietly got up from their corner and tiptoed over to the portrait hole. It was several minutes before Ron, Hermione, or Neville noticed that the two were missing.

Harry and Ginny laughed all the way down to the Entrance Hall. They walked outside holding hands and made their way down to Hagrid's hut. They knocked on the door, and Hagrid answered his door while Fang barked away. Harry and Ginny both scratched Fang behind the ears and greeted Hagrid. "Hi, Hagrid."

"Come in. Come in." boomed Hagrid. "How about some tea?"

They both nodded as they removed their cloaks, and they both sat down into one of Hagrid's enormous chairs. Harry casually and almost instinctively slipped his arm around Ginny's waist. Hagrid smiled into his beard and raised his eyebrows at this sight, but wisely chose not to comment on it.

"Where's Ron and Hermione?" he asked casually.

Harry snorted, "In the middle of one of their arguments. I doubt they have even noticed that the two of us have even left the common room."

Hagrid laughed, "Well, those two are always on about something."

Harry and Ginny nodded together and then laughed. Ginny spoke up, "I don't get it myself. Its obvious to everyone that they like each other, but Ron won't ask her out. It's actually quite pathetic."

Harry snickered, "Ron's just being stubborn. He wants to ask her out. He knows she'll say yes. He just won't do it because of all the teasing that he's afraid that he will have to deal with from his brothers."

Hagrid cleared his throat, "Well, Arry, what about the teasing you and Ginny are going to take from her brothers?"

Harry snorted, "I don't have anything to worry about."

Ginny looked at him, "Why not?"

"All of your brothers are afraid of you. They won't dare tease me in front of you. Besides, if they do tease me its only because they're jealous of the fact that I have the most beautiful girl in all of Hogwart's as my girlfriend." proclaimed Harry.

Ginny blushed as Hagrid's eyes widened, "Ye've changed a bit o'er the summer, Arry."

Harry grinned, "Yes, Hagrid. Yes, I have. I can't think of a better reason to have changed, though." He gazed unblinkingly at Ginny who blushed and looked down into her lap.

Hagrid laughed, "Well, I'm appy for you. Its bout time, too."

Harry turned and flushed slightly himself, "Hagrid." he exclaimed. "I know I took awhile to notice her, but it wasn't completely my fault."

Ginny looked up, "Then, whose was it?"

Harry looked at her, "Part of it was yours."

Ginny looked horrified, "How could any of it be my fault? You've known that I've had a crush on you, forever."

Harry grinned, "That's exactly why part of it was your fault."

Ginny now looked confused, "I don't get that."

Hagrid was looking from one to the other in amazement as he grinned happily to himself. Harry was grinning in triumph as he continued, "Well, you see, if you had been able to stay in the same room with me for more than five minutes before last year, I might have noticed how wonderful you were a long time ago."

Ginny blushed again and looked down. Hagrid's laughter burst out and interrupted them. "Ye two remind me so much of ye're parents, Arry."

Ginny looked at Hagrid in amazement, "Did Harry's parents really act like us?"

Hagrid shook his head, "Naw, they were more like Ermione and Ron. They fought all the time. They always tried to be one up on the other, though. Not to mention, you look a lot like Lily did at ye're age."

Harry leaned forward, "Ginny looks like my mum?"

Hagrid nodded, "Pretty close. The eyes are difrent. Other'n that, its really close."

Ginny leaned her head on Harry's shoulder. Harry leaned back into the overlarge chair and drew Ginny closer to him. He turned to Hagrid, "So, Hagrid, how have you been? How are your classes going?"

Hagrid grinned happily and began to talk about the different creatures that they were studying in his classes. The three of them talked for about an hour before they left to make their way to the Great Hall for dinner. Harry and Ginny bade Hagrid goodbye and went to sit at the Gryffindor table. Ron and Hermione looked at the two of them as they sat down. Hermione asked, "Where have the two of you been?"

"Hagrid's." Ginny answered easily. They all tucked into their meal and soon enough dinner was over and they were making their way back towards Gryffindor tower. Harry leaned over to Ginny, "I'm going to go practice. I daresay you'll get more of your homework done without me hanging around."

Ginny smiled, "Alright, but you had better be back before bed. I want a goodnight kiss."

Harry raised his eyebrows and then swept into a bow, "I am your humble servant. Don't worry, I'll be back in an hour or so." Then, he slipped out of the crowd of Gryffindors and disappeared down a side corridor.

After they were back into the common room, Ginny sat down at the table in the corner where she had left her books earlier. Hermione sat down across from Ginny. Ginny looked up expectantly, "Well."

Hermione continued to look straight at Ginny, "Spill. What is going on with you and Harry? Yesterday, you were complaining to me about him not noticing you. Then, this morning he asks you to be his girlfriend, and the next thing that we know the two of you are telling each other that you love each other. Things changed rather quickly."

Ginny grinned, "Well, I couldn't sleep last night, and I came downstairs to the common room. Harry was down here. We talked for awhile."

Hermione smiled, "Did you kiss?"

Ginny blushed, but continued to smile, "Yes. It was rather nice."

Hermione asked, "Was that your first kiss?"

Ginny shook her head, "No, I kissed Michael. It wasn't anything like this, though. When I kissed Michael, it was okay. When I kissed Harry, it was like magic. I can't explain it any better than that."

Hermione continued to smile at Ginny, "Good for you. Now if I could just get your prat of a brother to be as romantic as Harry has been the last two days."

Ginny giggled, "He'll come around. Harry said that the only reason that Ron hasn't asked you out is because he's afraid of all the teasing he will take from our brothers."

Hermione shook her head, "I said it this summer, and I'll say it again. Harry is getting extremely perceptive."

Ginny snorted, "No, he's not. He's always been this perceptive. He understands people, Hermione. He's just never been able to express it. Now, that he can it seems amazing, but really he's been this way all the time."

"How do you know?" asked Hermione.

Ginny shrugged, "I don't know how I know. When it comes to Harry, I just do."

While this conversation was going on, Harry had made his way to an empty room. He conjured two swords from thin air. “Wow, that was easier than I thought it would be. He turned to one of the statues in the room and pointed his wand at it, “Animata statue.”

The statue staggered almost drunkenly over to Harry. He handed it one of the swords. He took the other himself and then Harry began to duel the statue. He continued doing this for about forty-five minutes until he could maintain the concentration necessary to control the statue no longer. He took the sword from the statue and then it walked back to its niche in the wall. It ceased to move. Harry looked at the two swords, and then waved his wand at them and whispered, “Evanesca.” The two swords disappeared. Harry smiled to himself. Then, he walked from the classroom.

When he got back into the common room, he found Ron sitting by himself in front of the fire. “Where’s Hermione and Ginny?” he asked.

Ron looked up, “They’re out on prefects rounds. What happened to you?”

Harry looked down at himself, “Oh, I was practicing. I guess I overdid it a bit. I’m going to run up and take a shower. Tell Ginny where I am if she gets back before I come back down.”

Ron nodded as Harry ran up the stairs. A few minutes later Hermione and Ginny came back into the common room. Ginny looked around, “Where’s Harry? He told me he would be back by now.”

Ron sat up on the couch as Hermione sat down beside him, “He’s upstairs. He said he would be back down in a few minutes.”

Ginny smiled, “Okay.” and sat at the other end of the couch. Several other people began coming back in as curfew approached. Some of them made their way up to the dormitories. Others sat down for games, or started with homework. Ginny leaned back into the couch, and closed her eyes while Ron and Hermione talked softly.

Suddenly she felt hands cover her eyes, “Guess who?”

She smiled, “Michael, I’m so glad you came.”

Harry pulled his hands away from her face, “Hey, that’s not funny.”

“Yes, it was.” she countered.

Harry sat down beside her and pulled her into his lap, “Okay, maybe it was.”

Hermione looked over at the two of them and cleared her throat, “Harry.”

“Yes, Hermione.”

“I made out the announcement for the Quidditch tryouts. All I have to do is put the date on it.” said Hermione.

Harry grinned, “Thanks, Hermione. I booked the pitch for next Friday afternoon.”

Hermione nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment. She added the date of the tryout and then put it up on the bulletin board.

Harry squeezed Ginny slightly, “Are you still planning on going out for Chaser?” She nodded. Harry continued, “Excellent. Hey, Ron.”

Ron turned around, “What?”

“I’m thinking about fielding a full reserve team this year. Katie’s leaving after this year. Next year will be it for me and you. We need to think about the future of the team. Ginny, I’d like to keep you on as reserve seeker.”

Ginny interrupted, “I thought you wanted me to go out for Chaser.”

Harry continued, “I do. However, you’re the best alternate for me that we’ve seen. Since I’m the most likely player to get injured. We need an excellent back-up. That way if I’m hurt, you can switch over to seeker, and one of the reserve chasers can take over for you.”

Ginny smiled, “The way you talk, Mr. Potter, it sounds as if you’ve already decided that I’m going to be on the team.”

Harry shook his head, “There isn’t going to be any favoritism shown at the tryout. The best players will play. However, I’ve seen you play, Ginny. I’m not worried. Quidditch is in your blood, just like it is in mine.” Harry yawned. “Anyway, it’s been a long day, and I really think that I should be getting ready for bed.” He got up and allowed Ginny to slide from his lap into a standing position. The two of them walked over to the base of the stairs leading up to the dormitories. Harry drew Ginny up to him and the two kissed. Then, they parted and walked up to their rooms.

Ron covered his face with his hands, “Ugh!! I could have done without that mental image. My best mate snogging my little sister.”

Hermione slapped him playfully on the arm, “I think it’s sweet.”

Ron shook his head, “You would. Girls!”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” asked Hermione indignantly.

“Nothing. I’m just confused.” muttered Ron.

Hermione smiled, “Well, then, let’s see if I can enlighten you.” Then, she grabbed him and pulled him into a kiss.

Ron pulled back a moment later, “Uhh, Hermione.”

“Yes, Ron.”

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

“It’s about time you asked. Yes, Ron.”

“So does this mean that I have a date to the ball?” slipped in Ron slyly.

Hermione nodded, “As long as you don’t do anything too stupid between now and then.” The two of them got up and went upstairs to bed.

The next two days seemed to pass by in a flash. Before Harry knew it, he was standing outside the room that would host the Dueling Club on Thursday afternoon. He walked in and looked around. No one had arrived yet, but they would all be here shortly. Dumbledore had agreed to come down and introduce the club, before Harry would take over. He smiled in anticipation, while at the same time his stomach was churning with nervousness.

“Excited?” asked Dumbledore as he walked into the room with Tonks.

“Somewhat, Professor.” answered Harry.

“Nervous?” asked Tonks.

Harry merely glared at her in answer. Then, the first of the students made their way into the room. They were quickly followed by others. Soon the room was filled and it was time to begin. Dumbledore climbed onto the slightly raised dueling platform. “Welcome to the newly reinstated Dueling Club.”

Someone asked, “Are you going to be teaching us, Professor?”

Dumbledore smiled, “No, I will not. My duties as Headmaster leave me little time for such pursuits. However, I have entrusted the teaching of this club to someone that I believe will do an excellent job. Again, I welcome you all to the dueling club, and I give you your teacher, Mr. Harry Potter.”

Harry stepped up onto the platform beside Dumbledore. Everyone but the Slytherins had burst into applause at the announcement that Harry would be teaching them. The DA members clapped the loudest of all. Harry smiled and raised his hands for quiet. “Thank you all for coming. Since this is our first meeting, I decided that we are going to have a small demonstration. I would like a volunteer to come and duel with me.”

Immediately, a voice was heard from the midst of Slytherin’s that were off to one side. “I’ll do it.”

Harry turned to see who it was and grimaced as Draco Malfoy walked forwards, “Yes, Mr. Malfoy, I expected you to volunteer. After Mr. Malfoy and I have completed our duel, I would like for a few others to pair off and duel in front of the class. This will give, especially the younger students, an idea of what is possible.” He turned to Malfoy. “You will restrict yourself to non-lethal hexes and jinxes, Mr. Malfoy. Basically anything that we learned in our first couple of years at Hogwarts. Before you even think about it, this does not include ‘Serpensortia’. If you cast that spell, be prepared for the snake to attack you.”

Malfoy nodded in acceptance.

Harry walked up to him and pulled out his wand, “Now we bow.” The two nodded curtly at one another. Then, they turned and walked five paces from each other. Malfoy spun and fired off a curse, “Tarantallegra.” Harry dropped and rolled under it. As he came to his feet, Malfoy threw another curse at him, “Rictusempra.” Harry brought his wand up, “Protego.” He allowed the jinx to bounce off the shield charm, and then dove to Malfoy’s left and pointed his wand to Malfoy’s right and said, “Accio Crabbe.” Crabbe was pulled up from the ground to fly towards Harry. He slammed full into Draco as Harry was on the other side of him. Draco quickly pushed Crabbe off of him, and rolled to his feet. As he was doing this, however, Harry fired off three stunners in rapid succession. “Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!” Malfoy had little choice but to dive forward to dodge them. As he struggled back to his feet, Harry hit him with a Disarming Charm full on, “Expelliarmus.” Draco was thrown backward as his wand flew into the air to be collected by Harry.

“Excellent. Mr. Malfoy, here is your wand. You may return to the class.”

Draco marched over and took his wand from Harry. He straightened his robes as he walked back down to his place among the Slytherins.

Harry looked over the crowd of students. “That is a small taste of what we will be doing in this class. I have no intention of teaching you how to defend yourself in this class. I’m going to teach you how to attack someone. During the course of this class, you will all duel with people that are close to your own skill level. Occasionally, I will pair you with someone better. That way you will improve. You will be restricted to using hexes, charms, and jinxes similar to the ones Mr. Malfoy and myself were just using. I have no desire for any of you to end up in the hospital wing. However, we will be learning more powerful hexes and jinxes in this class. Some of you will have the opportunity to test out these more powerful spells on me.”

One of the Slytherins raised their hand, “What about the Unforgivables?”

Harry nodded, “Some of you have been exposed to the Unforgivables. Some of you haven’t. If I can get permission from Professor Dumbledore, we might possibly experiment with the Imperious Curse. There should be little danger with that one as long as I’m the only person that you are using it on.”

Draco spoke up, “Why is that?”

Harry looked Malfoy directly in the eyes, “Because, Mr. Malfoy, there is not a wizard or witch alive that can hold me under the Imperious Curse for more than a few seconds.”

A Ravenclaw third year raised her hand, “What about You-Know-Who?”

Harry nodded, “Excellent question, Miss Quirke. Voldemort was successful at keeping me under the Imperious Curse for about ten seconds.” Most of the students in the room flinched or shuddered at the mention of the Dark Lord’s name, but Harry paid no attention to the fact. He continued, “Now, I believe that it is time to set up another exhibition duel.”

“Wait.” interrupted Draco Malfoy.

Harry turned to him, “Yes, Mr. Malfoy.”

“What about the other two Unforgivables?” asked Malfoy.

Harry shook his head, “We will not be working with the other two Unforgivables.”

“Why not?” persisted Malfoy.

The look on Harry’s face turned hard, “Because, Mr. Malfoy, I have experienced both of those curses first hand. The next person that ever casts the Cruciatus Curse on me, I will kill. No questions asked. As for the other Unforgivable, I doubt there is a person in this room that does not know the story of what happened to the last wizard stupid enough to cast Avada Kedavra at me.” Harry’s gaze swept the rest of the class to make certain that everyone understood that he meant what he said. “Now, can anyone tell me why it would be useless to study the other two Unforgivables?”

No one raised their hand, not even Hermione. “The reasoning is actually quite simple. Those two curses cannot truly be blocked or deflected with magic. Solid objects will stop them. So, can anyone tell me what the best block is?”

Ginny raised her hand, “Move.”

Harry nodded, “Excellent, Miss Weasley. Reflexes and dodging is another thing that we will be working a great deal on in this class.” Harry paused to look at his watch, “I’m afraid that our time is almost up. We will not have time for another exhibition match. The next Dueling Club meeting will be on Monday. We will have meetings every Monday and Thursday barring the unforeseen. If there is a problem, you will all be notified of it as soon as is feasible. If there aren’t any more questions, I’ll see you all on Monday.”

Everyone began to file out. Ginny ran up and grabbed Harry in a hug and planted a kiss on his cheek, “Harry, you were great.”

Ron and Hermione came up. Ron looked impressed, “That was excellent, mate.”

Hermione smiled, “I’m proud of you, Harry.”

Dumbledore and Tonks walked over and Dumbledore smiled down at Harry with his eyes twinkling, “Most impressive, Mr. Potter. I daresay you will make an excellent instructor one day.”

Harry smiled, “After Voldemort’s dead, I might have to come back here, and take Tonk’s job.”

Tonks waved her hand, “You can have it anytime you want it. I’m not much cut out to be a teacher. I only took the job because they can’t seem to get anybody else to do it.”

All of them laughed, and the Gryffindors turned and walked out.

The next morning, Harry walked downstairs to the common room to see Ron standing at the bulletin board. Harry walked over to him, and asked, “What’s up, mate?”

Ron glanced over at him, “They’ve posted the notice for the first Hogsmeade weekend.”

Harry grinned, “Good.” He looked at the notice to see that the first weekend was the week after their Quidditch tryouts. While the two boys looked at the bulletin board, the girls made their way down from the dormitory. Harry turned around, and smiled, “Good morning, beautiful.”

Hermione smiled, “Why thank you, Harry.”

Harry looked at her, “I wasn’t talking to you.” He jerked his thumb over at Ron, “He’s the one that’s supposed to tell you that you’re beautiful. The best compliment I’m allowed to give you is that you look nice.”

Hermione pouted while Ginny laughed. Then, Hermione turned to look at Ron, “Well.”

Ron looked uncomfortable, “Um, well..”

Harry laughed, “Just spit it out.”

“You look great, Hermione.” Ron blurted out quickly.

Harry snickered as he reached out and took Ginny’s hand, “See, that wasn’t so hard.”

Neville joined them and the group of Gryffindors went to breakfast. After they finished eating, the four sixth years headed for Double Defense Against the Dark Arts, while Ginny went off to join her classmates.

Once Ginny was out of sight, Harry turned to Hermione, “You’ve got to help me.”

“With what?” asked Hermione.

“We’ve got the Hogsmeade weekend coming up, and I want to get Ginny some new dress robes.” said Harry.

Hermione grinned, “What do you need my help for?”

Harry jerked his head at Ron, “Well, if she’s anything like loverboy over here, then trying to buy her something is going to be a headache. I’m just afraid she’s going to think that I want her to buy new ones, because I don’t want to be seen with her in her old ones.”

Hermione looked piercingly at Harry, “Is that why?”

Harry returned her look stonily, “You know better than to even ask me that.”

Hermione smiled again, “I just had to check. I’ll help you drag her into Gladrag’s. Once I get her to start trying them on, you can just buy the ones she likes best. Then, you can give them to her whenever you want.”

Harry grinned widely, “I knew there was a reason that we keep telling people that you’re the smartest witch alive.”

Hermione blushed at the compliment. The quartet had reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. They went in and took their seats. The Defense class was relatively similar to the previous one. They continued their work on the Shield Charm.

Then, after lunch Harry and Hermione headed to Potions. They arrived in the dungeon and checked on their Polyjuice potion. While they were unpacking, Snape swept in. The conversation in the room seemed to be centered on the dueling club the night before. Snape frowned as he heard what the students were discussing.

“Well, Mr. Potter, it seems that you have succeeded at making yourself the center of attention once again. “ Snape sneered.

Harry yawned widely and obviously at the veiled insult. The other students snickered.

This seemed to infuriate Snape, “It seems that you are still as arrogant as your father..”

Snape stopped short as Harry vaulted the desk at which he was sitting and snapped a kick into Snape’s face. Before Snape even began to realize what had occurred, Harry had taken Snape’s wand away from him, and touched it to the tip of his throat. Harry touched his own wand to the bridge of Snape’s nose. “I warned you the last time, Snape. I would suggest that you not finish that sentence if you would like to live to see daylight.”

Snape swelled with fury, but then seemed to realize the predicament that he had gotten himself into. He looked up into Harry’s eyes, and suddenly it hit him. He was not dealing with James Potter. He was dealing with a wizard that was perfectly capable of destroying him, and would have no remorse about doing it. He pulled himself under control, “One hundred points from Gryffindor. Now, you will return my wand. We are going to see the Headmaster. I will see you expelled for this, Potter.”

Harry smiled as he handed back Snape’s wand, “Perhaps. If you keep pushing me, I will see you dead for this, Snape.” Harry hissed in so low a voice that only Snape could hear him.

Snape paled slightly at the implication behind Harry’s words. He stood up and swept from the room with Harry following in his wake. The class merely stood still and stared in shock at what they had just witnessed.

The two made their way through the corridors to the gargoyle that guarded the stairs to Dumbledore’s office. “Acid Pops.” Snape said, and the gargoyle sprang to the side. The two continued their way up the stairs into the office. The headmaster sat behind his desk and sighed heavily as the two walked into the room. Snape appeared to be livid, but Dumbledore had been around long enough to recognize the fear that lay behind Severus’ eyes. “Albus, this has gone far enough. The boy attacked me in Potions class.”

Dumbledore appeared to age dramatically in that moment, “Harry, why?”

Harry shrugged, “You witnessed what happened at headquarters. I warned him. He insulted my father again. Quite frankly, you should be glad that I didn’t kill him. That’s what I wanted to do.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed as he turned back to Severus, “You deliberately provoked him.”

Snape quailed under the furious stare that he was receiving from Dumbledore, but he nodded.

Dumbledore continued, “I told you that if you did so, that the consequences would be yours to bear. You knew better, Severus. You knew what he would do, and you pushed him anyway. Deal with it. I presume you will find it difficult to control your students after this. I suggest you tend to your other students. I will deal with Harry.”

Snape nodded grudgingly, and then spun and left the room pausing only long enough to throw Harry a menacing glance, to which Harry merely rolled his eyes.

Once Snape had left, Dumbledore looked at Harry, “Harry, you can’t attack professors.”

“I know that, sir. I warned him, though. He can talk about me being an attention seeking prat or anything else that he wants. However, I’ve had enough of him insulting my father. I will not stand for it. I don’t care if you throw me out of school, or if I get sent to Azkaban. The next time, I will kill him, and I don’t intend to blink an eye about it.”

Dumbledore asked wearily, “Harry, do really believe that you are capable of cold-blooded murder?”

Harry’s expression turned hard, “I’ve spent the last several years of my life being hunted by Voldemort. I’ve experienced his thoughts. I’ve seen him torture and kill various people. So, what do you think?”

10. Hogsmeade

The weekend passed quickly after Harry's conversation with Dumbledore. Hermione had expressed concern that Harry might be expelled. Harry assured there was no chance of him being expelled as long as it didn't happen again. He informed them rather dismally that the one hundred point deduction would stand. Ginny was furious. She yelled at Harry for doing something so stupid. She broke down and cried and told him that she didn't want to see him hurt. Harry soothed her and told her not to worry. Ron, Ginny, and Harry went down to the Quidditch pitch on Saturday to practice. The weekend was a great deal of fun. No professors. No classes. Just a bit of rest and relaxation.

The next week seemed to fly by just as quickly as the weekend. They began studying more advanced Shield Charms in Defense Against the Dark Arts. They continued light Conjuraction in Charms, and human transfiguration in McGonagall's class. The dueling club continued with Ron facing Hermione in an exhibition. Hermione defeated Ron rather handily. Ernie MacMillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley went head to head and Justin came out on top.

Before they knew it, it was Friday afternoon and time for the Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts. Harry stepped onto the pitch and looked at the gathering of students. There were a few older students, but it was mostly younger students standing around with eager expressions on their faces.

Harry tapped his wand to his throat, "Sonorus." Then, he turned to the mass of hopefuls. "May I have your attention?" Everyone quieted and looked at Harry. "I want everyone to divide up depending on which position you will be trying out for. I want anyone that is trying out for reserve keeper to go with Ron. Anyone trying out for Chaser, go with Katie. Beater tryouts to me." He tapped his wand to his throat, again, "Quietus."

A couple of second year boys made their way over to Ron. The only tryouts for Beaters were Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper, the replacements from the year before, and Dean and Seamus. By far the largest number of tryouts were for the Chaser position. Harry called out, "Oy! Katie. I'll be through with the Beaters quickly. Then, I'll come help with all the Chasers."

Harry put the four boys through their paces quickly. Then, he flew over to the Chasers and helped Katie work all of them out in alternating pairs.

After a couple of hours of Quidditch practice, Harry tapped his wand to his throat, "Sonorus. Alright, everyone to the ground." Harry remained on his broom, "That was excellent. I will post the team roster by tomorrow morning. If you are on the roster, then I expect you to be at practice on Tuesday afternoon at 5:00. We will be having a mock game between the starters and reserves. Depending on performance in this mock game and others that will follow it through the season, it is possible that their will be changes between the reserve and starting team. So, if you make the starting team, you better stay in shape if you want to keep your position. You are dismissed." He tapped his wand to his throat again, "Quietus."

Then, Harry landed and walked over to Katie and Ron. "Well, I'll meet you back in the common room. We have to discuss who we are going to put on the team." The other two nodded and Harry walked back over to Ginny. He smiled at her and said, "You were amazing."

She glowed with pride, "Thank you." The two walked hand in hand back up to the castle and headed into the Great Hall for dinner.

Later that evening Harry walked over to Ron and Katie in the common room and said, "Its time to discuss the team." They each got up and walked with Harry over to the corner where he normally sat with Ginny. Ginny got up from the chair that her and Harry had taken to sharing, and said, "I'll let you get on with it."

Harry stopped her with a hand on her arm, "Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

Ginny turned to look back at him, "I was going to let you all talk about who to add to the team."

Harry smirked, "Since you're already on the team, then you need to be here to help. Your opinion counts just as much as anyone else's."

Ginny smiled happily, "I'm not on the team, though."

"Yes, you are." returned Harry. "You're the reserve seeker."

The others nodded. So, Ginny sat back down with Harry. Harry turned to look at Ron and Katie. "Okay, let's get the beaters out of the way. Quite frankly, I wasn't very impressed with Kirke and Sloper's performance last year as replacements for the twins, and I wasn't really all that impressed with them today. Dean and Seamus weren't much better, but I think that they should go as the starters, and we'll keep Kirke and Sloper as the reserves. Is that alright with all of you?"

Ron spoke up, "Yeah, I was kind of paying attention out of the corner of my eye. It seemed like Dean and Seamus were doing a bit better of a job."

Harry nodded, "Alright, then. How about the reserve keeper, Ron?"

Ron shrugged, "I don't know, but I think that our best bet is to go with Euan."

Katie raised her eyes, "Euan?"

Ron nodded, "Yeah, he's a second year. I know he's kind of small, but he's quick, and he has a natural talent for goal. I think with a little practice, he could be a better keeper than Wood."

Katie smiled, "That's a heck of a compliment."

Harry nodded, "Okay, that's handled. Now, we need to figure out the chasers. Ginny seemed to work quite well with you, Katie."

Katie smiled at the insinuation, "Yes, actually she did."

Ginny blushed slightly at the compliment and then put in, "Well, if you want my opinion, I think that we need to go with Natalie McDonald as the third chaser."

Harry nodded, "Yes, I agree. I was watching her closely. She seemed to have a knack for the game."

Ginny slapped his arm playfully, "Oh, so you were watching her, huh."

Harry looked amused with himself as he realized what he had said, "Oh hush. I didn't mean it like that, and you know it."

The other three laughed at his obvious discomfiture. "Anyway, now that we have the starting team down. Let's discuss the reserve chasers."

Katie spoke up immediately, "Dennis and Colin Creevey for two of them."

Harry groaned, "I was afraid you were going to say that."

Ginny smiled, "Your three biggest fans all on the Quidditch team with you. Pitiful."

Harry snorted, "I can tolerate the president of my fan club, but the other two are a little overzealous."

Ginny looked at Harry and smiled, "Oh, so I'm the president of your fan club."

Harry shrugged, "That's what I figured. I was under the impression that you founded it after you stuck your elbow in the butter dish at the Burrow."

Ginny blushed at the reminder of her clumsiness around Harry the summer before her first year. Harry continued, "Now, for the final chaser. What do you think, Katie?"

"I think we should go with Emma Dobbs. She's not that great, but she's got potential." answered Katie.

Ginny nodded, "I agree. She showed some real spunk out on the pitch, today."

Harry clapped his hands together, "That does it, then. I'll post the team in the morning. For now I'm ready to relax for the rest of the weekend."

The others all agreed heartily.

The next morning Gryffindor Tower awoke to find the following message on the common room bulletin board.

Team members for the Gryffindor Quidditch Team

Starters

Position Player

Keeper Ron Weasley

Seeker Harry Potter

Chaser Katie Bell

Chaser Ginny Weasley

Chaser Natalie McDonald

Beater Seamus Finnigan

Beater Dean Thomas

Reserves

Position Player

Keeper Euan Abercrombie

Seeker Ginny Weasley

Chaser Colin Creevey

Chaser Dennis Creevey

Chaser Emma Dobbs

Beater Andrew Kirke

Beater Jack Sloper

There were squeals of delight from those that had made the team, and moans of disappointment from those that didn't. Harry grinned as he watched people's reactions from his customary corner of the common room.

The weekend seemed to slip by. Monday passed uneventfully, and suddenly it was time for another dueling club meeting. Harry walked out onto the platform and raised his voice, "May I have your attention?"

Everyone turned to Harry. "Tonight, we are going to be practicing dodging. I want everyone to pick a partner." The group of students began to pair off. "Now, I want one of you to begin throwing hexes at the other. I don't want to see any shielding spells. Just dodge. If you are hit, then it is time to switch places. Begin."

Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of people calling out curses. Tonks walked over to Harry, "I don't know if this was the greatest idea, Harry. We're going to have to be using a lot of counter-curses. No one seems to be doing a very good job of dodging."

Harry noticed a shielding spell flare out of the corner of his eye. "Stop," he bellowed. Everyone in the room froze in shock. "Mr. Malfoy, what were my instructions at the beginning of the lesson?"

Malfoy's eyes widened, "You said not to use a shielding charm."

"What did you just use?" Harry continued in a lethal voice.

Malfoy gulped visibly, "A shielding charm."

"Why?"

"Because its impossible to dodge curses for that long when you can't fight back." responded Malfoy defiantly.

Harry grinned, "That remains to be seen. Come here, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy walked up to the stage with a haughty expression on his face, but Harry could see the tinge of fear in his eyes.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy, since you seem to think that it is impossible to continuously dodge hexes, we will be putting your theory to the test." He turned to Tonks, "Professor, if you would kindly step off the stage." Tonks nodded and stepped down to the main floor where the rest of the dueling club were watching in anticipation to see what was about to happen. Harry returned his gaze to Malfoy. He motioned with his hand, "Whenever you wish to begin, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy stared at Harry in shock as he realized that Harry wanted him to throw hexes at him. Malfoy grinned as if Christmas had come early this year. He began shouting out hexes and jinxes and sent them flying at Harry. Harry easily sidestepped the first few. Then, he began ducking and rolling out of the way as Malfoy began hurling the curses faster and faster. When it was obvious that Draco was not going to be able to hit Harry, Harry decided to end the duel. He quickly dove under a jinx and then spun on the ground into a sweep that flipped Malfoy off his feet. Harry quickly leaped to his feet, and kicked Malfoy's wand out of his hand. Then, Harry drew his own wand and pointed it at Malfoy. "Do you yield?"

Malfoy nodded dumbly and croaked, "Yes."

Harry smiled, "Accio wand." He dropped Malfoy's wand onto his chest and then turned to the rest of the dueling club. "As you can see, it is not always the wizard with the strongest magic that comes out on top in a duel. There are many other ways to defeat an opponent than with a hex. We will continue practicing dodging next time. Dismissed."

After all the students had filed out except for Ginny, Tonks turned and smiled at Harry, "Wotcher, Harry, that was brilliant." All three of them turned as they heard clapping coming from the corner.

Dumbledore walked up to them, "Excellent, Mr. Potter. That was one of the finest displays of physical coordination that I have seen in many years."

Harry nodded and smiled, "Thank you, Professor. I've been working hard."

Dumbledore smiled as his eyes twinkled, "I can see that, Mr. Potter. I am impressed. I would say that you would be able to stand against most Aurors in a duel. Wouldn't you agree, Tonks?"

Tonks nodded emphatically, "I've seen some of the senior Aurors dueling in practice, and its amazing. Harry could keep up with them, though."

Harry snorted, "Unfortunately, however, I will be dueling Voldemort, not senior Aurors. Its going to be a slightly different story."

Dumbledore frowned as he became serious, "You will be ready when the time comes, Harry."

Harry nodded, but smiled grimly, "I hope you are right, sir. I really do."

The next day's classes passed just as quickly as the day before. Harry smiled in anticipation as he walked up to his dormitory to grab his Firebolt. This would be his first Quidditch practice as Captain. The excitement coursed through his veins. Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup the last two years that it had been held. He was determined to continue the winning tradition.

Harry got to the changing rooms ahead of the rest of the team. He changed, and then sat down in the captain's office. The others showed up and changed into their Quidditch robes. Ginny looked around, "Where's Harry?" The others turned around in circles to look for him.

Harry grinned as he walked out of the captain's office, "Alright team. Its time for our first team practice." Everyone jumped in surprise. Harry chuckled, "Starters, on the left, reserves on the right." The two teams lined up and headed out onto the pitch. Harry stepped up in front of them. "Okay, we're going to play a mock game. No seekers. I'm going to be the referee. We'll play to a hundred and fifty. So, chasers, the bulk of it is going to be on you. I want to go for a few new strategies. Beaters, I want you to concentrate on the opposition's Chasers. I want to control the game on goals. Don't worry about the seeker that much. If you see him or her after the snitch, belt a Bludger at them, but other than that I want you backing up our chasers and hammering the Bludgers at theirs. Take it to the air. I'll release the balls."

Harry watched the game in literal awe. Katie, Ginny, and Natalie were the perfect team. If anything they were a better functioning unit than Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had been. However, the real surprise came from the Creevey brothers and Emma Dobbs. They worked extremely well together. The two Creeveys in particular seemed to be able to anticipate each other's thoughts. It was a much closer game than it should have been. The major difference came in as Dean and Seamus began to hammer the Bludgers with better and better accuracy. The final score was 150-90.

Harry landed and leaped from his broom in excitement. "The Quidditch Cup is as good as ours. If we all play half that well throughout the season, its in the bag. That was amazing, guys. I'm impressed. Next Tuesday, same time. Be ready. Dismissed."

Katie raised her hand, "Harry, you do know that we're not in class."

Harry grinned at the jibe, "Yeah, I know but its habit forming when it comes to speaking in front of a group of people to adopt my teacher mode."

Ginny hugged him. Harry smiled down at her and they made their way back to the changing rooms to get their school robes.

The rest of the week flew by, and it was Saturday morning. Harry awoke with a smile on his face. He jumped up and ran over to Ron's bed and upended him from the covers onto the floor.

Ron jumped up in a rage, "What did you do that for?"

Harry headed for the door, but managed to throw back over his shoulder, "Hurry up. We're going into Hogsmeade."

Ron muttered under his breath as Harry walked out the door, "What is he so ruddy happy about? We go into Hogsmeade all the time."

The five of them met at the Gryffindor tower for breakfast. They all ate fairly quickly, and then got up to head out for Hogsmeade. Harry stopped, and asked, "Hey, shouldn't we see if Luna wants to come into Hogsmeade with us? She might want to hang out with us instead of the Ravenclaws."

Ginny beamed at him, "That's very sweet, Harry. I'll go ask her." Ginny wandered over to the Ravenclaw table and leaned over to Luna, "Hey, Luna, do you want to go into Hogsmeade with us?"

Luna looked up with her usual dreamy expression fixed on her face, "Yes, I would like that very much." She smiled dottily and got to her feet, and followed Ginny back over to Harry and the others. Ron, Hermione, and Harry greeted her warmly. Neville flushed slightly at the sight of Luna. Harry and Hermione exchanged knowing glances, and then Harry smiled evilly.

"Quick, let's get going." Harry said. He grabbed Ginny by the hand and pulled her along quickly. Hermione did the same. This left Neville to walk next to Luna. The two Weasleys squawked protests at being pulled along so quickly.

Harry smiled and whispered to Ginny, "Neville has got a crush on Luna. We're just making sure that they have to walk beside each other."

Ginny smiled and followed docilely. Harry glanced over and saw Hermione whispering t in Ron's ear. He figured she was saying much the same thing that he had just said to Ginny. Harry managed a quick look over his shoulder to see Neville and Luna side by side fighting to keep up with the other two couples. Harry grinned as the stepped out the main doors of the castle, and headed down the road to Hogsmeade.

"So, where do we want to head, first?" asked Harry as a tension breaker.

Ron's eyes lit up, "Zonko's?"

Hermione snorted, "What do you want to go in there for?"

Ron looked indignant, "Zonkos is always good for a laugh."

Harry chuckled, "I'll say. However, I think that we should head over to Honeydukes. We need to pick up some candy."

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah, I want some chocolate. How about you, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, "No, all the chocolate I need is stored right in those beautiful brown of eyes of yours."

Ginny blushed slightly, while Hermione and Luna smiled slightly. Neville appeared confused by the sappy statement, while Ron faked a gag. Hermione slapped him in the back of the head. "What did you do that for?" Ron asked.

Hermione put her hands on her hips and said heatedly, "You know, Ron, if you would pay just a little bit of attention to the way Harry treats Ginny, then you might learn something about how to treat a lady." Then, she turned around and stomped off towards Honeydukes.

Ron scratched behind his head, "What is she on about?"

Harry snorted, "Well, mate, I would say that she's a little upset by the fact that you make fun of me for being romantic. I think you might need to try saying some things that are a little bit sappy."

Ron looked at Harry, "So you mean I need to say really stupid stuff that sounds like poetry, and she won't be mad at me anymore."

Harry shook his head, "Ron, it doesn't work for you just to say stuff like that. You have to mean it, or they'll know you're just saying it."

Ron looked confused, "How will they know if you mean it or not?"

Harry shrugged, "Don't ask me how they know. Girls just have a way of knowing if a compliment is really sincere."

Ginny stepped up beside Harry, and laid her head against his shoulder. Then, she looked at Ron, "You can be really thick sometimes, Ron. Girls want to hear about how you feel about them."

"How do you tell them that?" asked Ron bewildered.

Harry shook his head, "It's a little bit different for each person. I just tell Ginny the first thing that comes into my mind. It usually covers how I feel pretty well."

Ginny smiled up at him, "It does. I love hearing what you have to say."

Ron shook his head, "I don't get it."

Harry laughed lightly, "You don't have to get it, Ron. Just talk to her." Then, he stopped, and looked around in bewilderment, "Where did Neville and Luna go?"

The three of them looked around the street, but they were nowhere to be seen. So, the three of them made their way into Honeydukes to find Hermione. Neville and Luna was there as well. Harry managed to maneuver close to Hermione for a moment and whispered, "Remember, you have to get Ginny into Gladrags without raising any suspicion."

Hermione smiled back at him, "Don't worry. I'll get her there before the day is out."

Harry smiled and nodded his thanks as Ginny pulled him over to the barrel of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. The six of them spent awhile in Honeydukes and then they walked outside. "Let's take a walk up to the Shrieking Shack. By the time we walk up there and back, it should be lunch time and then we can go to the Three Broomsticks." said Harry.

The others agreed and they strolled towards the outside of town. Once they reached the Shrieking Shack, they stopped and sat chatting for a little while. Then, the group headed back down to the Three Broomsticks for lunch.

Once they had finished their lunch, Hermione stood up and said, "We need to head into Gladrags."

Ginny asked, "What for?" as Ron groaned.

Hermione sniffed at Ron, "I want to browse for dress robes. I'll need them for the Ball."

Luna smiled, "I suppose that I could get some dress robes as well. Maybe someone will ask me." she said wistfully.

Ginny's face fell at the conversation. Harry smiled where she couldn't see him. He knew what she was thinking about. He also knew that he fully intended to rectify that situation. The six of them walked over to Gladrags. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Neville walked over to the boy's dress robes. Neville and Harry began trying on various robes. Ginny stopped Harry after the third set that he put on. "Those are perfect, Harry."

The robes in question were a bright emerald green, lined with stripes of purple at various places. Harry smiled at Ginny, "So, you really like them." Ginny nodded. Harry walked back into the dressing room, and changed back into his Hogwarts's robes. "If they're what you like, then, that is what I will get."

Hermione and Luna came over and dragged Ginny over to the girl's robes to try different ones on, Harry and Ron helped Neville pick out his robes, and then Harry walked up to the counter. He waited until Ron and Neville were paying attention to the girls. He leaned over to the salesclerk and whispered, "Do you see the young red-head over there?"

The sales clerk nodded. Harry continued, "She's trying on robes, but she isn't planning on buying one. However, when she tries on the one she likes best, I'm going to signal you. Get the price for it and I'll pay for it, when I pay for mine. I'm going to leave them right here. Then, I'll want the robes delivered to Hogwarts later this evening. I'll pay for the delivery charges. I'd like to have them delivered to Harry Potter."

The woman's eyes widened as she realized to whom she was speaking. Harry smiled and walked over to the girls. Shortly after he walked over to the girls, Ginny came out of the dressing room wearing a set of robes that appeared to be made out of solid gold. The robes looked as if they had been made for Ginny. Harry smiled in disbelief as he looked at how beautiful Ginny was. He signaled the clerk, who nodded in reply. She waited until Ginny had changed into a different pair of robes, and then took the gold ones and marked them sold. Once Hermione and Luna had chosen their robes, the group filed up to pay. Amidst the confusion, Harry paid for his and Ginny's robes. The clerk winked at Harry as he passed.

Once outside, Ron stretched, "Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm tired. I think I'm going to head back to the castle and take a nap before dinner."

Harry nodded, "I know what you mean, Ron. I think I'll join you. Ladies?"

The girls all smiled and nodded. The group walked back up to the castle and then headed for their respective common rooms. Harry pulled Hermione aside, "I'm having the robes delivered a little later. I'll distract Ginny before bed, and I want you to put them in her dormitory."

Hermione smiled, "Harry, I'm surprised at you."

"Why?"

"If someone had told me that you could be this hopelessly romantic two years ago, I would have laughed in their face. Now, though, it seems like you were born to the prospect." stated Hermione.

Harry grinned, "I just needed to find the right inspiration. It kind of fell in my lap."

The robes came later on in the afternoon, while Ginny was in her dorm room. Harry hid them behind his chair in the corner and then told Hermione before dinner where they were.

After dinner, Harry held Ginny back, and gave Hermione time to dash ahead and put the robes in Ginny's room. The five Gryffindors sat in front of the fire and chatted for a couple of hours. Harry kissed Ginny goodnight and allowed her to head up the stairs to get ready for bed. Harry smiled to himself when he thought about what was about to happen. Sure enough a moment later there was a scream of shock, and suddenly Ginny was running back down the stairs into the common room. "HARRY JAMES POTTER!!!!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Harry stood up from the couch and said in a very light tone, "Yes, dear?"

"What is that on my bed?" she demanded vehemently.

Harry raised his eyebrows, "Didn't you open the box?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you like them?" Harry asked smilingly.

"Yes, I liked them. That's not the point. You shouldn't have bought them." yelled Ginny.

"Why not?" Harry asked simply.

Ginny stopped at this simple question, and then seemed to regain her momentum, "They were too expensive."

Harry snorted, "Ginny, I wanted to buy the robes for you. In case you've forgotten I'm rich, and if I can't spend my money on the people that I love, then what good does it do me to have money?"

Ginny spluttered, "But, but.."

Harry smiled, "Don't give me any excuses. You can consider them a Christmas present if it makes you feel any better."

Ginny smiled this time, "Oh thank you, Harry. " She grabbed him in a hug, and then kissed him fully on the lips, hard.

As she backed away, Harry smiled and said, "Look at all the pretty fireworks."

Ginny smiled and headed back up to bed. Ron, who had been watching the exchange from the beginning asked, "So, are you really going to not buy Ginny anything come Christmas this year?"

Harry looked at Ron patronizingly, "Ron, you really do have a lot to learn when it comes to girls. Of course, I'm going to buy her something at Christmas."

Ron looked confused, "But you just told her to consider that her Christmas present."

Harry grinned, "Yes, I did. I just didn't say which Christmas."

Hermione grinned, "Harry, you can be positively devilish."

"I try."

11. The Legacy

The Gryffindors spent Sunday doing their homework, and soon enough it was time for bed. They got up the next morning, and headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast. Ron looked over at Harry groggily, “So, what are we doing tonight at the dueling club?”

Harry shrugged, “You’ll just have to wait and find out.”

Classes flew by for the day, and soon enough everyone was gathered for the dueling club meeting. Harry stepped up on the stand, “Tonight, we are going to be practicing the Patronus Charm.”

Everyone gasped in surprise and delight. Harry spent the rest of the lesson explaining the wand movement for the Patronus Charm. He allowed each member of the DA come up onto the stage and demonstrate their Patronuses. Once the club meeting ended, everyone filed out talking rapidly.

The five Gryffindors made their way out of the dueling hall, and then followed the rest of the student body down to dinner. After dinner, Harry held back and said, “I’m going to go practice for awhile.”

Ginny smiled, “Alright, but you had better be back in the common room before I go to bed.”

Harry smiled, “Don’t worry. I know better than to keep you waiting for too long.” He leaned over and pecked her on the corner of the mouth, and then headed for his training room.

Harry walked in, and then conjured his swords. He then animated the statue, and began his regimen of attacks and parries. He continued this for close to an hour before he heard a sharp intake of air from the doorway. “Harry, what are you doing?”

Harry turned around to see Professor Dumbledore standing in the doorway staring at him in amazement. Harry grinned, “I was practicing.” While he was saying this, the statue laid the sword it held on the ground, and then moved back into its niche in the wall, and ceased to move.

Dumbledore replied, “I can see that. But how?”

“I conjured two swords, and then animated the statue to fight back.” Harry returned.

Dumbledore smiled, “Will you follow me to my office, Harry?”

Harry nodded, “Of course, Professor.” He laid his sword down on the ground beside the other one, and then pulled out his wand and banished the two swords. He followed Dumbledore to his office.

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk, and began, “Harry, I believe that it is time to tell you about your heritage.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore quizzically, “What are you talking about, Professor?”

Dumbledore smiled, “Do you remember what I told you in your second year?”

Harry smiled, “Actually, you told me a lot of things in my second year. I needed quite a bit of guidance to handle that Basilisk.”

“I was talking about after you defeated the Basilisk, Harry. The part concerning the Sorting Hat.” continued Dumbledore.

Harry nodded, “Of course. You told me that only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that sword out of the hat.”

Dumbledore asked, “Did you not wonder what I meant by that statement?”

Harry shook his head, “No. I was twelve years old, and I had just been in a fight with a sixty-foot snake. After that I don’t suppose that I ever thought of it again. There has been just a little bit of excitement around here since then.”

Dumbledore chuckled, “I suppose you are right. However, Harry, you are the sole surviving descendant of Godric Gryffindor.”

Harry smiled, “That kind of figures. Gryffindor and Slytherin fought over the school. It seems only right that the fight between the pure-blood supremacists, and those that feel that blood doesn’t matter should be decided by their heirs.”

Dumbledore stood and walked over to his wall, “I guess it is time to return this to you, Harry. You are its rightful owner.” He picked the sword of Godric Gryffindor off the wall, and handed it to Harry.

Harry smiled even broader, “It is a fine weapon, sir.”

Dumbledore sat back down behind his desk. “Now, Harry, speaking of weapons, where did you learn to duel like that?”

Harry sat down and sighed, “I guess that its time to tell you a few more things that you don’t know. We have discussed my connection to Voldemort on many occasions. However, neither of us have ever truly realized the extent of the connection. I’ve finally tapped the depths of it.”

“Continue.”

“Well, as you know, I have been getting flashes of things Voldemort sees and feels for over two years, now.” Dumbledore nodded. Harry continued, “You also know that I have learned to induce that contact at will.” Dumbledore nodded again. “What you don’t know is that I also can look through Voldemort’s mind. I can perceive his memories, and knowledge like I was looking at a book in the library.”

Dumbledore sat very still. The expression on his face showed that he was completely stunned. He visibly swallowed, “Are you saying that you know everything that Voldemort knows?”

Harry grimaced, “Not exactly. I know the things that I have actively sought out and learned from him. That’s how I became an Animagus so easily. Its also where I learned how to fight with a sword.”

Dumbledore leaned forward eagerly, “What else have you learned?”

Harry grinned wryly, “I know what you’re hinting at. The answer is yes. I know everything that Voldemort did to become what he is today. I also know how to reverse the process.”

Dumbledore smiled, “So, you weren’t bluffing when you told Lucius Malfoy that you knew how to kill Voldemort.”

Harry made a seesawing motion with his hand, “Yes, and no. I have the knowledge, but currently it is useless.”

Dumbledore looked curious, “Why?”

Harry answered, “The only way to reverse the immortality rites that Voldemort has undergone requires four extraordinarily powerful wizards to cast a spell on the wizard in question at the same time. Currently the only wizards that have the power and ability to cast the spell are Voldemort, Bellatrix Lestrange, you, and me.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I see. So, there is no way for us to remove his immortality.”

Harry grinned, “Voldemort is not immortal.”

Dumbledore looked hopeful, “Then, why can’t he be killed.”

Harry proceeded to explain, “The rites that he went through raised his level of mortality to the point that the Avada Kedavra spell can no longer exercise enough power over him to rob his life force. However, there are ways to kill him. Unfortunately, no one controls enough power to kill him.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “You have the power, Harry.”

Harry nodded, “I know I have it, but I don’t control it. It still doesn’t do us any good.”

“Explain.” Dumbledore requested.

“Well, as you know the Prophecy says that I will have power that the Dark Lord knows not. It’s correct. I do have a power that he can’t even imagine. I can sense it within me, but I can’t touch it.” explained Harry.

“I’m not sure exactly what you mean, Harry.”

Harry elaborated, “Have you ever been able to see something, but then not been able to reach it?”

Dumbledore nodded, “Of course.”

“Similar concept. I know that the power is within me, but its as if it is trapped behind an invisible door that I don’t have the key for. I can’t figure out how to tap it. That’s why I have been doing everything within my power to try and make Voldemort hesitate to attack me. I need time to unlock the power.” said Harry.

“Let me get this straight. If you unlock your power before Voldemort attacks then we win. If he attacks before you discover it, then we are doomed.” said Dumbledore resignedly.

Harry nodded, “That about sums it up.”

Dumbledore allowed his shoulders to slump, “Then, all we can do is hope and pray. The fate of the world is in your hands, Harry. I only wish that things could have been different.”

Harry smiled at the aged Headmaster, “Don’t worry so much, Albus. I’ll find a way.”

Dumbledore looked up quickly at Harry’s use of his first name. Then, he smiled and the twinkle returned to his eye, “I wouldn’t call me by my first name in front of the other professors. Minerva especially would have a fit.”

Harry laughed. “I was wondering, sir. I need to spend some more time in my Animagus forms. I would like permission to go running in the forest.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, “I don’t know, Harry. Its not exactly safe.”

Harry snorted, “No offense, professor, but what is there in the forest that could catch me to even attempt to hurt me. I have a phoenix form remember. I would just run on the grounds, but I don’t think most of the students, or the professors for that matter would take to the idea of a full grown panther running around.”

Dumbledore grinned appreciatively as he nodded, “Good point. You have permission to go. Just don’t stay out after curfew, much. Out of curiosity, who knows about your ability to transform?”

“You, Professor McGonagall, and Ginny.” stated Harry firmly.

Dumbledore seemed surprised, “You mean you haven’t told Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger.”

Harry nodded, “I figured the less they knew the better. The only reason Ginny knows is an accident. She only knows about my panther form though. She has no idea that I have more than one form.”

Dumbledore asked, “That reminds me. Have you made any progress towards a third form?”

Harry shook his head, “Unfortunately, no. I haven’t really had the time to devote to it with all the time that I have been spending honing my sword technique.”

“Why have you been working so hard on the sword fighting skills?” queried Dumbledore.

“I was hoping to introduce it in the dueling club. I was planning on letting them use blunted practice swords. I want to make sure that I’m confident with what I’m doing before I start trying to teach other people.” replied Harry.

Dumbledore smiled, “Excellent decision, Harry. Now, I believe that I have kept you waiting long enough. I think that a young Miss Weasley will be highly upset if you do not return to the common room to give her a goodnight kiss soon.”

Harry flushed slightly at the jibe, “I’ll be going, then. Thank you for the sword, professor.”

“Not at all, Harry. It was already yours. I was merely returning it.”

Harry smiled, “Well, I’ll see you later, Professor.”

Dumbledore smiled as Harry walked out of his office.

Harry made his way through the corridors to the portrait of the Fat Lady. As he walked into the common room, he realized that he must have been in Dumbledore’s office considerably longer than he thought. It was empty except for one fiery-haired young girl that had a dangerous expression on her face as she stared at Harry. Harry gulped as he realized that he was in for an earful.

“HARRY JAMES POTTER, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!!!” bellowed Ginny.

Harry squirmed under her gaze, and said meekly, “I’m sorry, Ginny. Professor Dumbledore found me practicing, and asked me to come up to his office. He had some things to explain to me.”

Ginny suddenly noticed that Harry was holding a sword in his hands. “What’s that?”

Harry followed her gaze to the sword of Godric Gryffindor. He smiled, “This is what Professor Dumbledore wanted to talk to me about. Don’t you recognize it?”

He handed it to her, and she replied, “It seems familiar.” Then, it hit her, and her eyes widened, “This is the sword that you used to kill the Basilisk.”

Harry nodded, “Look at the name below the hilt.”

Ginny turned the sword over in her hand and saw the name engraved into the blade. She asked in awe, “Is this really Godric Gryffindor’s sword?”

Harry nodded again, “Yes, and now it belongs to me. Professor Dumbledore just informed me that I am the sole remaining descendant of Gryffindor.”

“The Heir of Gryffindor.” Ginny breathed in shock and awe as she gazed at Harry.

“And as the Heir of Gryffindor, it is my fate to face the Heir of Slytherin in battle.” said Harry matter-of-factly.

Ginny shook her head, “No, it doesn’t have to be that way. You don’t have to face You-Know-Who.”

Harry sighed, “Yes, Ginny I do. I will have to stand and face him one day.”

Ginny looked stricken, “But, you can’t. I don’t want you to die, Harry.” She dropped the sword onto the couch beside them, and flung herself at Harry.

He held her in his arms and soothed her, “I have no intention of dying, Ginny. I have too many things to live for. I plan on killing Voldemort.”

Ginny flinched at the sound of the Dark Lord’s name, and then began to cry. Harry sat with her on the couch until both of them fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The next morning Hermione woke up and made her way down to the common room. There she discovered Harry and Ginny lying asleep on the couch in each others arms. She noticed a sword lying on the floor beside them. She bent over to examine it, but the moment she touched it she felt a wand tip touch her nose. She froze and looked up as the wand was quickly withdrawn. Harry smiled sheepishly, “Sorry. You kind of startled me.”

Ginny stirred at his words, and snuggled into Harry’s side more firmly. Harry smiled as he looked down at her. Hermione smirked slightly as she asked, “So what exactly happened down here last night?”

Harry looked at her coldly, “Nothing happened. She was just upset, so I held her until she fell asleep. I couldn’t take her up to her dormitory since boys can’t climb the stairs. So, I just stayed down here with her.”

Hermione smiled, “Well, I believe you, but I suggest you get up before Ron wakes up and discovers you down here with his baby sister. He might not take it to well.”

Harry snorted, “Ron never takes anything too well. It’s a byproduct of acting before you allow your brain time to function. He has a really bad habit of that. I guess you’re right though. I wouldn’t want him to catch me in a compromising situation. He’d probably attack me before I could explain anything.” He nudged Ginny, “Wake up, love. It’s almost time for breakfast.”

Ginny opened her eyes and smiled broadly, “I could get used to waking up to a face this handsome.”

Harry smiled in bemusement while Ginny rolled off the couch to stand up. He stood and stretched, “I’m going upstairs to change, I’ll meet you back down here in a bit.”

Ginny grinned as she scampered for the stairs to the girl’s dormitory, “You had better hurry, Mr. Potter.”

Harry leaned over to pick up his sword, and then headed for the stairs. Hermione stopped him by asking, “Where did you get that sword, Harry?”

Harry looked over his shoulder as he headed up the stairs, “I’ll explain later.”

Within twenty minutes, most of Gryffindor tower was awake and ready to head down to breakfast. Harry joined Ron, Neville, and Hermione as they waited for Ginny. A minute later she came down the stairs and took Harry’s hand. The five Gryffindors walked out the portrait hole, and headed for the Great Hall.

“So, Harry, are you going to tell us where you got the sword?” asked Hermione.

“Dumbledore.” replied Harry.

Ron looked from Hermione to Harry, “What sword?”

“The sword of Godric Gryffindor.” inserted Ginny.

Ron merely gaped in amazement. Neville’s mouth dropped open in shock. Hermione blinked, and then asked, “Is it really the sword of Gryffindor?”

Harry replied evenly, “Yes, and now its mine. Dumbledore returned it to me last night.”

Neville echoed, “Returned?”

Harry smiled, “Yes, returned. I am the sole surviving descendant of Godric Gryffindor.”

Ron stammered, “Seriously?”

Harry nodded in amusement at their reactions. Ginny continued to smile for the same reason.

Ron turned to look at his sister, “You knew?”

Ginny winked, “Of course I knew. I know many things.”

Ron looked bewildered, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Harry chuckled, “One of these days, you’ll find out.”

“Are you saying that she knows things about the Order that you haven’t told me and Hermione?” asked Ron hotly.

“Not about the Order. She knows things about me that you don’t know, though.” grinned Harry.

Ron continued, his ears beginning to turn red, “Why does she get to know things that we don’t?”

Harry shrugged, “She is my girlfriend, and if you don’t mind, Ron, I will keep my own counsel as to who I tell what. If you would like to ever be filled in on anything again, I suggest that you learn to control your jealousy and your temper.” responded Harry icily. He fixed Ron in a penetrating gaze with a firm look set in his eyes.

Ron stared him in the eyes for a moment, before he gulped and then broke eye contact. “Sorry.” Ron mumbled under his breath.

Harry nodded, “I know. Now let’s get to breakfast. Don’t forget its Tuesday. We have Quidditch practice this afternoon.” The others nodded as they went in for breakfast.

The rest of the day was spent in class or the library working on things for class. Time for Quidditch practice rolled around, and it found Harry in the captain’s office working on strategy, while the others got changed. Harry walked out. “Today we’re going to play a little haphazard. I want all four beaters to hammer the Bludgers at the chasers and me.” He turned to Ginny, “Ginny, next practice, you and I will switch. I’ll pretend to be a chaser as best I can, and I’ll let you practice at seeker.”

Ginny smiled and nodded. The team marched out onto the pitch. The practice went quite well. Harry was extremely pleased with the team’s performance. “Great job, team. I’ll see you all later. Dismissed.”

All of the team members smiled at Harry’s adopted tone of authority. Harry walked into the dressing room and quickly changed back into his school robes. Since it had been a short practice, there was still about an hour before dinner. Harry decided that now was as good as time as any to work on his transformations. He hugged Ginny, “I’m going to go for a walk before dinner. Don’t worry, I’ll be back in time.”

Ginny protested, “I want to come with you.”

Harry shook his head, “I’m going for a walk in the forest. I’m afraid that its out of bounds for you.”

Ginny looked at Harry accusingly, “Its out of bounds for you too.”

“No, its not. Professor Dumbledore gave me permission to go in last night, so that I can spend some more time in my four legged form.” Harry replied grinning.

Ginny looked apprehensive, “Be careful, Harry.”

Harry smiled down at her, “Don’t worry. There isn’t a creature in that forest that can catch me. There’s precious few that would survive an encounter with me if they did, come to that.”

Harry kissed her lightly on the lips, and then headed off for the forest. Ginny sighed as Ron and Hermione came over to her. “Where is Harry going?” asked Hermione. Ron wisely refrained from opening his mouth.

Ginny shrugged, “Into the forest.”

Ron looked shocked, but Hermione was indignant, “Why is he going in there?”

Ginny shrugged, “You’ll have to wait for him to tell you.”

Ron looked at Ginny piercingly, “You know something about this that we don’t.” It was a statement not a question.

Ginny sighed, “As Harry told you this morning, Ron, I know many things that the two of you don’t when it comes to Harry. He said that he would be back before dinner, so let’s just go up to the common room. I’ve got a lot of homework to do.”

Hermione and Ron followed, but Hermione muttered to Ron, “I have half a mind to give him detention for running off into the forest. He knows that its out of bounds.”

Unfortunately for Hermione, Ginny heard the comment. She rounded on the slightly older girl, “Now I know why Harry doesn’t tell the two of you anything anymore. Both of you are complete idiots. After I tell Harry you said that I wouldn’t be surprised if he decides that the two of you aren’t even worth the time it takes to be friends with you anymore. And for your information little miss perfect prefect, Harry has permission from the Headmaster to go into the forest, so I would just like to see you try and give him detention.” Ginny spat out acidly. Then, she turned and stormed off leaving Ron and Hermione standing with their mouths hanging open.

Ron looked at Hermione, “Mione, I’m surprised at you. That was something that people would expect me to say.”

Hermione looked ashamed, “I know, but I just can’t help it. I’m so frustrated. I want to know what’s going on and Harry won’t tell us anything.”

Ron nodded, “I understand, but we just have to wait on Harry. He’s bound to have a really good reason for not telling us things. He’s always told us everything before. I know its hard being left out of the loop, but we have to trust Harry.”

Hermione looked at Ron in amazement, “When did you get so smart?”

Ron shrugged and laughed, “It happens sporadically. I have to say something smart if you say something stupid. It has something to do with some law of conservation or something in Muggle Chemistry that Dad tried to explain to me once.”

Hermione giggled, and the two followed Ginny’s wake up to the castle.

They found her in the common room working on her homework. Hermione walked over to Ginny and said hesitantly, “Ginny, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by what I said. I was just upset.”

Ginny said, “I know, but you need to get over it. Its Harry’s decision on what to tell you and Ron. If he doesn’t want you to know certain things then there is a reason for it.”

Hermione sighed, “I know, but its still hard not to know.”

Ginny snorted, “How do you think I’ve felt for years. I knew the three of you were up to stuff, but none of you ever saw fit to let me in on anything that you did.”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other in amazement. Neither of them had ever thought about the fact that Ginny had been left out of the loop during her first three years at Hogwarts. Neville came in and joined the other three, and they all sat down to do homework.

While this was occurring in Gryffindor common room, Harry had made his way into the forest. He changed into his panther form, and began to run. When he felt that enough time had passed, he changed into his phoenix form. Then, he flew from the forest back up to the castle. He flew over to one of the windows of the common room in Gryffindor tower. He perched on the sill and looked in. He saw Ginny sitting at a table by herself. He pecked on the window and she looked up. She seemed surprised, and came over to the window and opened it. Harry flew in and perched beside her, and began to trill.

Ginny was shocked by the sight of the magnificent golden phoenix. She petted its feathers as it trilled in greeting. She smiled at the beauty of the creature. “I’ve got to show this to the others. I hope Harry comes back in. He loves phoenixes.” Ginny said to herself. She looked at the phoenix and asked, “Will you follow me down to the Great Hall?”

Harry took flight and began making circles just above her head. Ginny began walking towards the portrait hole. She noticed that the phoenix was following her. She smiled as she left the common room and headed for the Great Hall. When she walked into the Great Hall, several people noticed the phoenix circling over Ginny’s head. Several of the girls squealed in delight at the beautiful animal. Most of the boys just gaped in awe.

Ginny sat down across from Ron and Hermione. They both looked at her almost stupidly. Harry settled down on the bench directly beside Ginny. Ron managed to say, “Where did the phoenix come from?”

Ginny shrugged, “It pecked on one of the windows in the common room. I let it in, and now its following me.”

Hermione finally shook herself out of her shock, “This is impossible.”

“Why?” asked Ron.

Hermione looked at him with a patronizing expression on her face, “Ron, phoenixes are rare. However, amongst phoenixes, the most rare color to see is gold.” She pointed to the phoenix, “This is probably the only golden phoenix in all of Britain. The chances of it just happening to fly up and tap on a window in Gryffindor tower are next to nothing. Someone must have sent it here.”

As Ginny was about to reply the three Gryffindors heard a coughing sound behind them. They looked to see Professor Dumbledore standing gazing at them. He smiled, “Miss Weasley, I must ask where you found such a magnificent companion?”

“I don’t know where he came from, Professor. He just came up to the window in our common room.” replied Ginny.

Hermione interjected, “I believe that the creature must have been sent here by someone.”

Dumbledore gazed at the phoenix for a moment. The phoenix cocked its head and looked back at him. Then, it nodded at the unspoken question in Dumbledore’s eyes. Dumbledore smiled as he realized that the phoenix was indeed Harry. He smiled down at the Gryffindors, “I don’t believe that you have anything to worry about from this phoenix. I know its master very well.” With this mysterious statement, Dumbledore turned and walked away.

Once Dumbledore had walked off, the phoenix spread its wings, and then flew from the Great Hall. Harry found a deserted corridor off the main hall and then transformed back into his human form. He then ran back towards the Great Hall for dinner. He came in and then settled down in the seat he had vacated only moments before. “Sorry, I took so long.”

Ginny gushed out, “Oh, Harry, you missed it. The most beautiful phoenix came into the castle.”

Harry smiled and nodded, “I know.”

Hermione looked over at him, “What do you mean you know? Did you see it leaving or something?”

Harry shook his head, “No, I didn’t see it leaving. However, I did send it to Ginny in the first place.”

Ron jerked his head up from his food. He finally found the conversation they were having more interesting than his mashed potatoes. “What do you mean you sent it?”

Harry smiled, “Well in a manner of speaking, it mine.”

“Yours?” the three other Gryffindors said at the same time.

Hermione continued, “You mean you are the phoenix’s master?”

“I hesitate to call myself its master. Phoenixes are extremely intelligent creatures. I prefer to call myself its friend.” replied Harry.

The others seemed content with this explanation, and conversation turned to other matters. Ginny continued to make comments about how beautiful the phoenix had been. Harry smiled at these compliments, which Ginny did not completely understand. She merely shrugged it off as Harry indulging her when she was being overenthusiastic.

12. Halloween

The last week of September and then the entire month of October seemed to slip by in a blur. Harry balanced his time in between teaching the dueling club, practicing his Animagus forms, perfecting his swordplay, keeping up with his class work, and last but definitely not least, spending time with his beloved Ginny.

Over the past five weeks Harry had managed to work out his third Animagus form of a chameleon. Only Dumbledore knew about it, however. He continued to maintain the charade with his phoenix form, and spent a great deal of time with Ginny in this form. His schoolwork came much more easily since he had learned most of it through his time spent musing inside Voldemort's brain. He had honed his swordplay down to an art, and was now ready to begin instructing the dueling club members in swordplay. He decided to have the first meeting with the usage of swords on Halloween night. He went to Dumbledore's office to tell him of his plans. He entered the office to find Dumbledore sitting behind his desk with Fawkes on his customary perch beside the desk. Harry smiled, "Hello, Fawkes."

Fawkes trilled *Greetings, young phoenix-kin*

Harry continued to smile as he turned to the headmaster, "Professor, I came to talk to you about the dueling club."

"Is there a problem, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head, "No, Albus, there isn't a problem. I just thought that you would like to know that I plan on introducing the sword to the dueling club tonight. I was hoping that if you weren't too terribly busy, that you might drop by for a few minutes."

Dumbledore smiled, "Well, it is Halloween. I think that a break from some of my tasks this evening could be quite pleasant."

Harry grinned, and replied playfully, "Somehow I expected you to say that."

Dumbledore snorted, "I suppose you are trying to tell me that I am becoming predictable."

It was Harry's turn to snort, "No sane wizard or witch would ever use the word predictable in the same sentence with your name, Headmaster."

Dumbledore chuckled merrily, "I suppose not. Half the wizarding world believes me to be a little crazy."

Harry gave a loud, fake cough, "I think that you are being kind, sir. Half the wizarding world does think that you are a little crazy. The other half think that you are completely bonkers."

Dumbledore laughed out loud at this statement, "True. Very true. However, there are a select few that know the truth."

Harry nodded, "Yes, there are a few of us. We know that you are completely bonkers instead of just thinking it."

Harry made this statement so matter-of-factly that Dumbledore stopped and stared at Harry in amazement. He finally managed to find his voice, "Now, Harry, that isn't exactly nice."

Harry chuckled now, "No, professor it wasn't but a little jocularity is what people like us need once and awhile."

Dumbledore nodded soberly, "Yes, we do. Harry, you know that if I felt that things could have been different, I would have looked for the way to make it so."

Harry waved him off, "Don't worry about it. There are a lot of things that I would change about my past if I could, but for all we know the consequences of doing things any other way than we did could have been worse than anything we have had to face. I wish that Sirius were still here. I wish that my parents were still here. However, if they were, I might not be who I am. If I wasn't then Voldemort might have won. It was a heavy price that I have had to pay, but I am willing to follow the path to the end. I will die if necessary, but I will take Voldemort with me. That is an oath that I make to you, Albus. One that I must ask you to convey to the rest of the wizarding world if I fall in battle."

Albus continued to stare in amazement at the young man standing before him. Never before had he seen a child put through so much, or have so much expected of him. Yet, here stood a mere sixteen year old boy, that was ready to throw his life away if that was what was needed to save the world. The pure unselfish love that ruled this young man's heart must truly be the most powerful force on Earth. Dumbledore blinked and spoke, "If you are going to begin the dueling club meeting on time, Harry, we had better be moving."

Harry stood up and headed for the revolving staircase with Dumbledore on his heels. "Bye, Fawkes."

Good-bye, phoenix kin. I will fly with you the next time you are out

Harry laughed, "I would like that."

The two wizards walked down the corridor, and Dumbledore turned to Harry and asked, "What did you tell Fawkes that you would like?"

Harry looked around him to insure that no one was within earshot, and then replied, "He told me that the next time I was out flying, he would join me."

"Has he ever flown with you before?" asked Dumbledore inquiringly.

Harry nodded, "Yes, he has been out with me once. We flew over most of the Forbidden Forest. He told me about many things that have occurred in your office since you became headmaster."

Dumbledore asked quickly, "Like what?"

Harry grinned broadly, "I shall never tell. Secrets between brothers should never be uttered, and that is exactly what Fawkes and I are now. Brothers."

Dumbledore sighed, "I suppose that means that I'm not going to get anything out of you."

Harry nodded, "That would be correct."

The two of them walked into the dueling chamber to find the dueling club quiet and attentive waiting for Harry to begin. Dumbledore raised his eyes at Harry. Harry merely shrugged and then headed for the dueling platform. It was readily obvious why everyone was so quiet. Arrayed on a long table were various sized practice swords.

Harry smiled at everyone, "Tonight, we will begin studying methods of dueling that do not require magic. For the rest of the term we will be practicing swordplay. I will teach all of you the basics. You will be expected to practice forms and parries outside of dueling club time if you expect to become even remotely good at this. Once everyone has mastered the rudiments of swordplay, we will begin practicing combining swordplay with magical spells in dueling. The practice swords that are laid out behind me simulate the true weight and balance of a sword of similar size. They are blunted and padded, so that the only damage that you can really do to each other with them will be a bruise. I still want you to be careful and treat them as if they were a real sword, however. This will teach you proper safety measures, because some of you will be allowed to duel with real weapons before the end of the year. Now, I would like everyone to come up and test out different swords to find one that is best suited to you. You will be expected to keep up with your practice sword and bring it with you to dueling club meetings."

"Don't you think that it would be more interesting to have them see a real duel before they pick their sword, Potter?" came a snide voice from a corner.

Harry turned, "That would be quite educational, Professor Snape. I presume you have someone in mind to be participants in this duel."

Snape revealed that he was carrying a sword. It was a finely crafted blade, and had obviously been specially made just for Snape. It was just as obvious that he took painstaking care to keep the blade in top condition. "Well, Potter, since you claim to be able to instruct the students in swordplay, I think that they should get a taste of your skill."

Harry nodded, "Very well. I assume that since you have brought your own sword that you intend to be the challenger."

Snape answered coldly, "That would be a natural conclusion, Potter. I intend to show you what a true sword master is capable of."

Harry smiled patronizingly at Snape, "We shall see, Professor, we shall see. Until then, since you have challenged me, you may set the terms of the duel."

Snape stepped up onto the platform opposite Harry. "No magic. Sword only. First blood."

Harry nodded, and then pulled out his wand, "Wingardium Leviosa." He moved the table of practice swords back off the platform. Then, he turned and called out, "Accio sword." The sword of Godric Gryffindor soared over to Harry from a stand next to the wall. Harry pocketed his wand within his robes as the sword came to him. He caught it easily in his right hand, and then stepped back and swung the sword in a quick X shape in the air in front of him as he set his feet. Then, he set the sword to the en garde position and smiled at Snape, "Whenever you are ready, Professor."

Most of the students realized quickly that Harry's sword was very finely crafted. However, very few people in the room recognized the sword for what it truly was. Snape was one of these few, though. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw the blade. They widened still further at the obvious ease with which Potter wielded the blade. He began to think to himself that perhaps this had not been the best idea. Potter seemed to be full of surprises this year. This may very well be another to add to his list. In spite of himself Snape found himself admiring the young man. He shook himself from his reverie and then advanced on Harry.

Harry waited for Snape with a smile on his face. He was going to enjoy this. Snape lunged to the attack. Harry parried easily, and then the fight began in earnest. The swords struck each other fast and furiously. It was completely apparent to everyone in the room that Snape had not been bluffing. He was a master swordsman. His form was basically flawless, and his skill was unprecedented. However, it was also immediately apparent that as good as Snape was, Harry was better.

After several minutes of blows being exchanged back and forth, Harry finally saw his opening. He caught Snape's sword high, and then circled it around low. Then, he flipped his sword around and struck straight up with all his might. This sent Snape's sword straight up, but to do so Snape credit he managed to hang onto the sword. However, this moment was all Harry needed. He slipped past Snape's guard and rapped the flat of his blade against the back of Snape's sword hand. Harry quickly reversed his blade and knocked Snape's sword from his hand. It skittered across the platform, and before Snape could have possibly blinked Harry's sword tip was touching Snape's throat.

Harry smiled again, "Hold out your hand, Professor." Snape extended his right hand. Harry brought his blade down and across it. Blood began to well from the cut. "First blood." Harry then turned and threw his sword up into the air. He quickly drew his wand out and banished the sword across the room to its stand. By the time the class had watched the sword settle onto its stand, and turned back to Harry, he had pocketed his wand and was looking at the class expectantly. "Well, are you lot going to sit there, or are you going to choose practice swords?"

No one moved. Harry began to get mildly annoyed, "If anyone is still sitting by the time I count to five, they will have to fight me one on one with swords and magic, tonight. One."

The group of students scrambled out of their chairs to head for the sword laden table so quickly that it was almost comical. Tonks walked over to Harry while the students were picking out their swords. She looked at him in awe, "Wotcher, Harry, I didn't know that you were that good with a sword."

Dumbledore walked up beside her, "Nor did I."

Harry shrugged, "I practice a lot."

The three of them heard Snape's voice break in, "That is obvious." He held out his sword to Harry. "By dueling rights, this blade now belongs to you."

Harry looked from the blade to Snape in surprise, and then he answered, "Keep your sword, Professor Snape. A blade that magnificent deserves an owner worthy of it. It has one right now."

Snape nodded curtly, and then walked from the room without another word.

Dumbledore looked down at Harry in absolute amazement, "Harry, your parents would be very proud of you. You do know that, don't you?"

Harry smiled and flicked a single tear from his eye, "Yes, Professor Dumbledore, I know."

The students all seemed to have picked out a weapon, and were standing around fidgeting. Harry smiled, "Well, I suppose I should teach them a bit before they start poking each other's eyes out."

Dumbledore chuckled at Harry, "I am going to return to my office. I will see you at the feast in a while."

Tonks and Harry both nodded to Dumbledore as he turned to leave. Tonks returned to her position as an observer, and Harry strode to the center of the dueling platform. "Now, everyone, pair off. I want you to attack in an overhand lunge like this." He demonstrated with one of the practice swords. "I want your partner to block like this." He demonstrated a high cross block. "You will take turns doing this for the next fifteen minutes and then we will change maneuvers. Begin."

The class paired off and completed his instructions. Then, he gave them a new attack and its corresponding block. They went through four different sets before Harry announced that it was time to quit. All the students filed out of the room, most of them talking excitedly about the lesson or the upcoming feast in about half an hour. Harry turned to his friends as they walked up to him, "So, what did you think?"

Ginny hugged him, and then placed a delicate kiss on his lips. "You were simply wonderful."

Ron looked at Harry in awe, "I had no idea you could do anything like that, Harry."

Harry grinned, "What do you think I've been doing when I keep slipping off by myself to practice?"

Ron shrugged, but Hermione asked forcefully, "So, this is what you have been spending all your time doing. You could have let us in on it."

Harry shook his head, "No, I couldn't. I'm not trying to be insulting, Hermione, but you are nowhere near my level when it comes to combat abilities. You would only be in the way. Besides, that isn't the only thing that I have been practicing."

Ron looked hesitant, but he decided to ask anyway, "Would you tell us what else you've been practicing? I'll understand if you can't."

Harry looked surprised, "Ron, you're learning. Yes, I'll tell you what else I've been working on. I decided to follow in the marauders footsteps."

Ron looked bewildered, "You decided to pull a lot of pranks."

Ginny snorted, and Hermione swatted Ron's arm, "I swear, Ron, sometimes you can be a bit slow. He means that he has been trying to become an Animagus." said Hermione.

Ginny spoke up proudly, "He hasn't been trying, he's been able to transform completely for awhile now."

Hermione shook her head, "That's impossible. It takes years to become an Animagus, and I know that Harry wasn't working on it before this summer at the earliest."

Harry looked at Hermione shrewdly, "Hermione, do you know what your problem is?"

Hermione bristled, “I wasn’t aware that I had a problem.”

“Well you do. You think too much with your head, and not enough with your heart. Don’t trust your brain too far, its not always right, Hermione. You have to follow your heart sometime, even if it gets you into trouble. Sometimes the trouble your heart gets you into, makes you a much better person in the long run. That’s something your brain, studying, and logic will never truly be able to do.” continued Harry.

Harry started to walk away, but Ron stopped him , “Wait, aren’t you going to tell us what form you take?”

Harry shook his head, “You’ll just have to wonder until we’re alone later. Then, I’ll show you my form.”

Ron smiled, but Hermione continued to frown as she thought about what Harry had just said to her. Ron nudged her from her thoughts, “Come on, Hermione. You can try to figure out if Harry’s right about you later. Its time for the Halloween feast.”

The Gryffindors entered the Great Hall and sat at the Gryffindor table. The feast appeared before them. The Hall was decorated with floating Jack-O-Lanterns, and bats flew throughout the hall. All of the students quickly tucked into the scrumptious meal. Conversation erupted all around the hall. It was immediately noticed by Harry and his friends that the majority of the conversations revolved around the dueling club meeting.

Hermione gazed over at Harry, “It seems that your dueling club is a hit.”

Ron snorted, “That’s an understatement. Everyone that goes to the meetings talk about them constantly. I get sick of hearing all the girls discuss how handsome Harry looks when he’s teaching, or how smart Harry must be to be in charge of the dueling club, or how courageous he was to face the Dark Lord all by himself. It’s all a load of dung anyway. Half the girls that are saying the stuff are the ones that talked about him behind his back last year because they thought he was crazy.”

Harry blushed at the idea of girls calling him handsome, but Ginny’s face was red for another reason, “Ron Weasley, exactly who has been talking about my boyfriend like that?” Ginny asked, a dangerous note to her voice.

Harry immediately tried to placate her, “Now, Ginny, don’t go flying off the handle just because some goofy girls complimented me. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Ginny responded adamantly, “Oh, yes it does. It means that they are planning on making a pass at you.”

It took all of Harry’s willpower to refrain from smiling. He didn’t want to row with Ginny. “Ginny, I don’t think any of the girls are dumb enough or brave enough to make a pass at me.”

Hermione and Ron giggled. Ginny rounded on them, “Just what is so funny?”

Ron stopped laughing, but he continued to smile knowingly, “Well, Gin, he does have a point. No girl that knows he’s dating you would come near him. They wouldn’t want to have to face you.”

Hermione continued, “Besides, anyone that has seen the way Harry looks at you, Ginny, would know that he’s off the market.”

This somewhat mollified Ginny, “Alright, I guess I won’t have to kill them.”

Harry smiled, “Good, because I hate to think of how lonely I would be if you ended up in detention for the rest of term for hexing Pansy Parkinson or some other Slytherin.”

Ginny slapped his arm, “Hey, that is not funny, Mr. Potter. I don’t even want to think about that cow having her hands on you.”

Harry shuddered at the mental image that came with that statement, “Good point. Neither do I. Its not a pretty picture.”

All of the others laughed at the expression on Harry’s face. They continued to eat, and talk for the next hour. When the feast was winding down to a close, an owl came flying in the window, and landed at the Head table next to Dumbledore. Harry watched in interest as Dumbledore removed the letter from the Owl’s leg. He then unrolled it, and his eyes widened in alarm. He looked up and locked eyes with Professor McGonagall, who immediately got up and left the Great Hall. Dumbledore then looked out into the crowd of students and locked eyes with Harry, who had been staring at him. Harry raised his eyebrows in question. Dumbledore nodded firmly, and mouthed “one hour” to Harry. Harry bobbed his head to indicate that he understood and that he would be there.

The other three looked at him quizzically, “What was that all about?” asked Ginny.

“There has been an attack by the Death Eaters. For Albus to be this worked up about it, it must have been huge. I’ll bet my Firebolt that it was against the Ministry.”

“Why the Ministry?” asked Ron.

“Its obvious.” replied Harry. “They’ve got seventeen Death Eaters locked up in the Auror division of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Hermione looked surprised, “How do you know that?”

“Simple logic.” answered Harry. “We caught five in Diagon Alley, and then ten more at Platform 9 ¾. They caught two in the attack on the Minister’s home. They took them to the Ministry since they can’t send them to Azkaban anymore. I’ve been watching the Daily Prophet quite closely, and there has been nothing to indicate that they have been moved to stand trial. It stands to reason that they are still there. It would be the best place for them under the circumstances.”

The other three nodded. Harry continued on grimly, “Although if Voldemort has attacked the Ministry and managed to free them, then I’m going to have to propose something to Dumbledore that I don’t think that he’s going to like.”

Hermione looked at Harry in concern, “What are you talking about, Harry? What are you going to propose?”

Harry shook his head, “Nothing that any of you need worry about right now. I may discuss it with you depending on what Albus’ reaction is.”

Ron finally asked, “Why do you keep calling Professor Dumbledore by his first name?”

Harry smiled, “I didn’t realized that I was doing it.”

Ginny looked at him appraisingly, “You wouldn’t use his first name unless you were accustomed to doing it.”

Harry continued to smile, “Very shrewd observation. When its just him and me, I call him by his first name, occasionally. I try not to make too much of a habit of it, and I especially try not to do it in front of other people. I guess you’ll just have to keep my little secret.”

Ron decided to interject playfully, “What if we don’t want to keep it a secret?”

Harry drew his wand and pointed at Ron’s forehead, “Ever had your memory erased?”

Ron paled, “Calm down, mate. I was just joking.”

Harry continued to stare into Ron’s eyes, “I know. I wasn’t.”

The three of them gulped at the obvious threat hanging in the air. This definitely was not the Harry of a year ago. He had grown up a great deal. They all had different feelings about this. Ron missed his best friend. Ginny swelled with pride that he had chosen her amongst all the girls that he could have had. Hermione, however, was concerned that his maturity was bought at too high a price.

Once dinner was over, the other Gryffindors headed for the tower while Harry made his way to the gargyle in front of Dumbledore's office. "Acid Pops." The gargyle sprang to the side, and revealed the spiral staircase up to Dumbledore's office. Harry climbed the stairs and walked in to find a great deal of the Order members already assembled. They included Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Tonks, of course. Also present were several of the people that had come to get him from the Dursley's the first time that he had went to Grimmauld Place. There was Elphias Doge, Hestia Jones, Dedalus Diggle, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Emmeline Vance. The core members such as Arthur Weasley, Alastor Moody, and Bill Weasley were also there. Dumbledore was not in evidence, but that really meant little where he was concerned. He could have been sitting behind his desk, and not a person in the room would have known it. However, it was apparent that he was not in the room, as several of the members seemed to have been waiting for awhile. Dumbledore burst into the room a moment later.

"I'm afraid that we will have to postpone the meeting for just a few minutes. If all of you will wait in my private chambers, I must deal with the Minister of Magic, who will be here in just a moment." stated Dumbledore quickly. He waved his wand and the bookcase on the far wall swung out. The group of Order members headed through the opening.

McGonagall stopped and asked, "Albus, what does the minister want?"

Dumbledore cast a quick glance at Harry, and then looked back at McGonagall, "I think that he is a little distressed by the attacks and is looking for someone to blame, Minerva."

McGonagall looked distressed for a moment, and then pressed her lips into a firm line. She followed the others into Dumbledore's chambers. Harry stood from his seat and cleared his throat, "If you don't mind, Professor Dumbledore, I would like to remain. If the Minister plans on accusing me of certain things, I would like to at least be present to hear what the fool has to say."

Dumbledore looked stern, "Harry, calling the Minister a fool is not going to accomplish anything."

"I'm aware of that, Professor. It doesn't change the facts of the matter, however. I'll stay over here in the corner." Harry pointed to a corner between two of the bookcases.

Dumbledore nodded, and then sat down behind his desk as the bookcase closed behind the other Order members. A minute later, Cornelius Fudge burst into the room. Dumbledore smiled up at him from his seat, "Good evening, Cornelius."

Fudge nodded curtly, "Dumbledore, I'm here to discuss your handling of the Potter boy."

"What is it that you wish to say about him, Cornelius?" asked Dumbledore mildly. However, there was a hint of steel beneath his words.

Cornelius seemed not to notice the warning in Dumbledore's tone. "There have been two attacks on my home, and now there was an attack at the Ministry this evening to free several Death Eaters that we had in custody."

Dumbledore nodded, "I am aware of all of these attacks, Cornelius. I fail to see what that has to do with young Mr. Potter."

Cornelius huffed, "Well, then, I will tell you, Dumbledore. It has come to my attention that the boy and Mad-Eye Moody ordered Dawlish to release one of the prisoners to take some ridiculous message back to You-Know-Who. That is the reason that You-Know-Who knew to send the Death Eaters to attack the Ministry tonight to free the others that we had captured. So, I decided to see what the boy has been getting up to at school. I have learned that you are letting him teach dueling to the other students, and that the boy has attacked a teacher. This is inexcusable. I, for one, will not allow you to give the boy a free run anymore. I am having the Misuse of Magic Office charge the boy with multiple counts of flagrant disregard for magical safety. I intend for him to be expelled from school."

Harry snorted loudly from the corner, "Well, Minister, you are of course entitled to do as you please. However, I would not recommend it."

Fudge spun around to gape at Harry. Then, he advanced slightly, "Boy, you would do well to remember who you are speaking to. You will address me with a proper amount of respect."

Harry smiled coldly, and stepped right up into Cornelius' face, "As I was saying before I was interrupted. I would not recommend the course of action that you are planning. I have read the by laws concerning an accusation of the sort that you are making. I am well within my rights to challenge you to a duel."

Fudge spluttered as he realized what Harry was saying. Then, he laughed, "If you think that you have a chance of defeating a fully trained Ministry official in a duel, then I encourage you to try."

Harry's smile grew broader, "Cornelius, I don't think that I could beat you in a duel. I know that I could mop the floor with an incompetent buffoon like you. I have faced Lord Voldemort in combat." Fudge winced at the sound of the Dark Lord's name. Harry continued, "Where as you can not even stand to hear his name mentioned. You are nothing more than a blustering coward. I released Lucius Malfoy, whom I might add would not have been captured and identified as a Death Eater if it had not been for me. You would still be pocketing his bribes, and be in the employ of the Dark Lord."

Cornelius paled as he realized the implication behind what Harry had just said. Harry began again, "I will keep my own counsel concerning Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I suggest that you scurry back to your office and hide. If you ever bother me again, it will be as I told Dawlish in Diagon Alley. You will face the business end of my wand."

Fudge seemed to gain a little bit of composure, "I will not stand for this. After your transgressions concerning your use of magic outside of school last summer, the Misuse of Magic Office will have no choice but to listen to my view of matters."

Harry laughed in his face, "Considering the fact that I was cleared of the charge due to the presence of Dementors in Little Whinging, I don't see how that is relevant. I wouldn't advise dragging up that incident anyway, unless you want to be facing charges yourself."

Even Dumbledore was surprised at this, "What do you mean, Harry?"

"I mean that the order for the Dementors to come to Little Whinging and attack me, came from the Office of Cornelius Fudge. I have proof." answered Harry confidently.

Dumbledore rose from his desk and rounded on Fudge, "What is he talking about, Cornelius?"

Not even Fudge could fail to note the dangerous tone in Dumbledore's voice this time. "I don't know what he's talking about, Dumbledore. I didn't send Dementors after him. I wanted to discredit him, not kill him." Fudge continued to cringe before the furious stare that was in Dumbledore's eyes.

Harry interrupted, "He's telling the truth, Professor. Fudge had nothing to do with it. His beloved Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge ordered the attack."

Dumbledore turned to Harry, "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded, "I've got witnesses to her admitting it, right before she was about to cast the Cruciatus Curse on me."

Dumbledore blazed with fury, "She cast the Cruciatus Curse on you?!"

Harry shook his head, "No, she was about to. Hermione stopped her by telling her what she wanted to know."

By now Fudge was looking on in interest, "What was it that she wanted to know?"

"She wanted to know where Dumbledore was hiding the weapon he was developing to use against the Ministry." answered Harry.

Cornelius struck his thigh, "I knew it."

Harry looked at Fudge in disgust, "Are you really that stupid? There was no weapon. Hermione just made it up to get Umbridge not to cast the Curse on me. She figured that we would have more time to get the upper hand on Umbridge and get away if she thought we were leading her to the weapon. We did."

Fudge sat down into a chair heavily. "I would have never expected this."

Harry looked Fudge in the eyes, “Now, Minister, go back to your office, and stay out of our way. If you let the people that know what they are doing run this war, we’ll let you keep your office. Otherwise, I will see you thrown out of the Ministry so fast that your head will spin. Do I make myself clear?”

Fudge nodded. Then, he got up and wordlessly walked from the room.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, “I can’t believe you just did that.”

Harry returned Dumbledore’s smile, “Someone had to put that idiot in his place. We need him out of the way if we’re going to handle Voldemort and his followers.”

Dumbledore waved his wand, and the bookcase swung open again. The Order members filed back into the office. Dumbledore saw the looks of bemusement on most of their faces. He looked disapprovingly at McGonagall, “I presume that you were listening.”

Bill Weasley cracked a smile, “You can hardly blame us, sir. That had to be the funniest thing that I have ever seen.”

Dumbledore smiled back, “Yes, I believe it was. Now, let us get down to business.”

“Yes, what exactly happened at the Ministry this evening, Albus?” asked McGonagall.

“A group of Death Eaters invaded the Ministry’s Auror department in order to free the Death Eaters that we captured in the events leading up to the beginning of the school year. They were successful. All of the captured Death Eaters were freed.” explained Dumbledore.

Harry broke in, “How many casualties did we take?”

“You get right to the point don’t you, Potter?” asked Kingsley grimly.

Harry shrugged, “I need information. Asking direct questions is the easiest way to get it.”

Kingsley nodded, but it was Arthur who answered heavily, “We lost three Aurors, and one visitor was killed.”

Harry nodded solemnly, “Did we get any of the Death Eaters?”

Kingsley shook his head, “We managed to stun several of them during the battle, but the other attackers grabbed them when they Disapparated.”

Harry turned and looked directly at Dumbledore, “Sir, I think that it is time that we abandoned your way of doing things.”

Snape interrupted, “What exactly is that supposed to mean, Potter?”

“Simply, that I think that it is time for us to fight fire with fire. If all we’re going to do is take Death Eaters prisoner, then they will simply keep rescuing their fellows. More and more people will go to Voldemort’s side, and we will lose this war. Its time to stop taking prisoners, and start killing Death Eaters on sight.” said Harry determinedly.

Several of the people in the room gasped in surprise. Hestia Jones leaned forward, “You can’t be serious, Potter. That would make us just as bad as them. To use the Dark Arts would turn us as well.”

Harry snorted in response, “In essence, magic can not be divided into good and evil. It’s the intent with which you use the spell that determines good and evil. Granted, there are some spells that you can’t think of any use besides evil for, but there are precious few of those.”

Elphias Doge interrupted, “What are you talking about, Harry. The Unforgivables are most definitely evil. There are many other curses that are totally evil.”

Harry shook his head, “People consider being a Parseltongue a Dark Art. Do you think I’m evil just because I can talk to snakes.”

“No one thinks that you are evil, Potter, but the fact remains that some spells are evil.” responded McGonagall.

Harry looked her squarely in the eye, “I agree that there are a few spells that can only be used with an evil intent, but as I said there are precious few of them. The only one that I can think of right away is the Cruciatus Curse. The broad range of spells that people call the Dark Arts are nothing of the sort.”

Dedalus Diggle stuttered, “Surely, you’re not suggesting that you can find a use for the Killing Curse and the Imperious Curse that aren’t evil.”

“That is exactly what I’m suggesting, Dedalus. I can think of several situations where those two curses could be used for good.” proclaimed Harry.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, “I fail to see a reason to use the curses that could result in good, however, I am prepared to be enlightened. So, by all means, continue, Harry.”

Harry smiled, “I presume that all of you would consider Voldemort dying a good thing.” Everyone but Dumbledore nodded in acquiescence. “I guess that covers the Killing Curse.”

Diggle raised his hand, “Can You-Know-Who be killed by the Killing Curse?”

Harry shook his head, “I’m afraid not, but if he could, then that would be a good use for the spell. To take a life is a horrible thing, but to take a life to save a hundred is nobility.”

The wizards around the room nodded in agreement. Dumbledore frowned, but refrained from comment. Tonks asked, “Okay, that covers the Killing Curse, but I’m interested to see what use you can come up with for the Imperious Curse.”

Harry shrugged, “It’s completely situational. Hypothetically, let’s say that you’re on the top of a tower, and its collapsing. The only way to survive is jump off. The problem is the person you’re with is terrified of heights, and won’t jump. You put them under the Imperious Curse and make them jump. You just saved a life with one of the horrible Unforgivable Curses.”

Even Dumbledore raised his eyes in astonishment at this scenario. No one in the room had ever thought of magic in the light that Harry had just presented it.

“Furthermore, who’s to say that the Stunning Spell isn’t a Dark Arts spell. The Death Eaters use it all the time.” said Harry plainly.

Hestia Jones protested, “We don’t use the spell for the same reasons that the Death Eaters do, though.”

Harry smiled, “Which is exactly what I’m trying to tell you about all spells. Everyone believes certain spells and abilities to be dark simply because dark wizards have used them. It all boils down to prejudice and ignorance. All that truly matters when you cast magic is what you’re trying to accomplish. If your aims are good, then you won’t step over into the Dark Arts.” Harry took a deep breath, “That is why I think that it is time for us to start killing the Death Eaters. Its time that we fight fire with fire.”

The room erupted into a mixed babble until Dumbledore cleared his throat. The noise died down instantly, “I believe that you are merely repeating yourself, Harry.”

Harry shrugged, “Whatever it takes to make my point.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I understand your feelings on the matter, Harry, but we can not stoop to the Death Eaters level in this fight. It is my feeling that to take a life whatever the circumstances is horrible. It must be avoided at all costs. Only in the most dire of circumstances should you kill another wizard.”

Harry returned Dumbledore’s nod, “I understand how you feel, Professor. What you seem to be missing is the fact that these dire circumstances that you keep espousing are at our door. If we don’t take drastic action, people are going to start dying left and right. I, for one, have no intention of laying back and giving Voldemort a free run. Your feelings be damned, Professor. I don’t know about the rest of the Order, but if I see a black cloak and white mask, the wizard or witch wearing them dies. I don’t intend to compromise either. Its time to take this war right back to Voldemort. If the rest of you are too squeamish, then I’ll take them all myself.”

Professor McGonagall interrupted, "Come now, Potter. You are only a student. You can't be serious about fighting the Death Eaters. Its time you realized that even though you are exceptional, you are not a fully qualified wizard."

Harry looked at McGonagall in disgust, "You really don't get it, do you." He pointed at Dumbledore, "He is the strongest wizard alive. He can do magic that none of you can imagine being possible. He has accumulated all this power and knowledge over a long and full life. What you don't seem to see is that as strong as he is, he still can't beat Voldemort. In six months, I will be Professor Dumbledore's match in power. At the rate I'm increasing my power, in a year he won't even be able to touch me."

McGonagall's mouth grew quite thin, "Mr. Potter, you are being arrogant. It will be many years before you are a match for Professor Dumbledore."

Harry snorted, "You had better pray that it doesn't take me years to attain his power. According to the Prophecy, I'm the only one who can defeat Voldemort. To do that, I need to be Dumbledore's superior. So unless you want to be fighting Voldemort for a long time, you need to listen to me."

Several of the Order members began clamoring, "What does the Prophecy say? Is this true, Albus?"

Dumbledore stood up and raised his hands, "I'm afraid that everything young Mr. Potter has said is true. He will surpass me in power, and when he does I will be handing over the leadership of the Order of the Phoenix to him."

The room erupted at this statement. Harry seemed quite amazed, but merely smiled in response. McGonagall was the one that finally managed a coherent sentence, "Albus, you can not mean this. Harry is an exceptional boy, but he is still just that, a boy."

Harry didn't give Dumbledore a chance to respond, "Professor McGonagall, do I need to repeat the conversation I had with Molly Weasley this summer?"

McGonagall's eyes widened, "No, Mr. Potter, I don't believe that I need to hear that speech."

Harry nodded, "Very well, then, by what standard do you measure adulthood? Age or life experience or hardship?"

McGonagall cleared her throat, "I think that all three of them are measures of maturity."

Harry nodded, "I agree. I may be lacking in the first category, but I have the other two in spades. How many of you have faced the things that I have faced in my short life? How many of you have borne up under the scorn and ridicule that I have faced in my short life? How many of you lived the first eleven years of your life without even knowing who you truly were? Stuck in a cupboard, beaten by your cousin, insulted and ignored by the only family that you knew? Then, once I finally find out who I am, its not good news. I discover that I have a crazed Dark Lord, who's ultimate goal in life is to see me dead. How many of you could face that?"

All of the witches and wizards in the room paled at the idea of Harry's childhood. Even McGonagall seemed moved, "I had no idea that those Muggles treated you this badly."

Harry looked at her stoically, "It was worse. I would have rather faced Voldemort a thousand times over than to spend a minute in that house with the Dursleys. At least Voldemort was an enemy I could fight back against and feel like I was accomplishing something."

Everyone remained silent for a moment, and then Dumbledore broke the silence. "I think that it is time for those that are present to hear the Prophecy. Some of you have heard it before, but I ask that you indulge those that have not." Dumbledore opened one of his cabinets and withdrew his Pensieve. He placed his wand to the side of his head and withdrew the tendril of thought and placed in the Pensieve. The by now familiar vision of a younger Sybill Trelawney emerged.

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT ... AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

The members of the Order that were hearing this for the first time seemed to be in complete shock. Even the members that were hearing this for the second time still thought that it was amazing. Dumbledore finally spoke into the silence, "As you can see, Harry is the natural choice for me to pass leadership of the Order to. He will literally be the savior of the world."

Arthur stood, "I don't know about anyone else, but I've hear enough for the night. I don't think that any of us are in any condition to decide anything tonight. I say that we meet later. Its time for all of us to call it a night."

The rest of the Order members nodded in agreement. Harry and Dumbledore smiled indulgently at the rest of them, and Harry looked to Dumbledore, and then said, "I think that Arthur's right. It's time to call it a night. If we stay here any longer, they're going to want me to show off some of my skills."

Dumbledore nodded, and all of the others stepped up to Dumbledore's fire and began to disappear through the Floo Network. Soon, the only people remaining in Dumbledore's office were the Professors and Harry. Harry sighed, "I think I'm going to head back to the tower. I'm a bit tired."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded, "I understand, Harry. I will see you in the morning at breakfast."

Harry nodded, and left the office. He returned to Gryffindor tower, to find Ron, Hermione, and Ginny waiting for him in the common room. He sighed in trepidation.

They looked at him expectantly, and he shook his head resignedly, "The attack was against the Ministry. All seventeen Death Eaters escaped."

The three gasped, and Ginny asked, "Was anyone hurt?"

Harry nodded, "Four people were killed in the attack. Three of them were Aurors and one civilian."

Ron asked hesitantly, "Was it anyone we knew?"

"No. I'm tired, and I think that I'm going to go to bed." said Harry simply.

Hermione burst out quickly, "What did you propose to Dumbledore, and how did he take it?"

"I can't answer that question, Hermione. Its privileged information for the time being." responded Harry in a dead voice.

Hermione looked as if she was about to ask something else, but Ron grabbed her hand and squeezed it warningly, and she stopped. Ginny got up and walked over to Harry. "Go ahead and get some rest, Harry. I'll see you in the morning." She gave him a quick kiss on the lips and Harry climbed the stairs to his room.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Hermione rounded on Ron, "Why did you stop me from asking him some more questions?" she asked heatedly.

Ron shook his head, "Hermione, you weren't going to get any answers out of him. All you were going to accomplish was making him mad."

She got up and stomped around the room, "We deserve to know what's going on."

Ginny looked at her and asked, "Why?"

Hermione stopped and looked at Ginny in wonder, "What are you talking about?"

“I asked a simple question. Why do you deserve to know anything? What have you done that makes you so necessary? Harry is the key to all of this. I don’t know how I know, but I know that Harry is going to have to be the person to face You-Know-Who. When you come up with something that can compare to that, then you can say that you deserve to know. Harry has a reason for not telling us about the Order. I don’t know what it is, but I know that I love Harry, and that he loves all of us. If he doesn’t want us involved, then that is good enough for me.” Ginny walked up the stairs to her room.

Hermione looked to Ron for support, but Ron merely shook his head, “I’m sorry, Hermione. I don’t like not knowing what’s going on any better than you do. There’s nothing that we can do about it, though. I have to agree with Ginny.” Then, he got up and went up the stairs to the boys dormitories, leaving Hermione to fume by herself.

13. Quidditch Again

The week of the first Quidditch match came. The Gryffindors walked out onto the pitch for the last practice before the game. Harry beamed at the other Gryffindors, "Now, I know that the Slytherins have been taunting all of you the last couple of weeks. I want you all to continue ignoring them. Let's save every bit of animosity for the game. I want to wipe the smirks off of their faces. Let's bury them on Saturday."

The team cheered and then took to the air. The technique of the team was flawless. Harry called time to the practice after one hour. "Now, I want everyone to rest and relax for the rest of the week. I don't even want you to think about Quidditch until the game. We're going to win, and we're going to do it with smiles on our faces. The Slytherins can go crawl back into their stinking holes after we're done with them."

The night before the match, Gryffindor tower was in high spirits. It seemed like the entire house was bouncing around the common room. People clumped together to chat, and then dispersed and collected into different sets. Harry sat quietly with Ginny by the fire. Ron and Hermione were nearby, but the four didn't speak. Harry had come to enjoy his silent musings, and none of the others saw fit to interrupt him. Around ten o'clock, Harry finally got up and said, "Team, get to bed." No one seemed to have heard him amidst the commotion. So, Harry drew his wand, and pointed to his throat, "Sonorus." Ginny, Ron, and Hermione saw him and knew what was coming, so they covered their ears. Harry yelled, "Quiet." Then, he tapped his wand against his throat again and muttered, "Quietus." The entire common room fell silent. Harry continued, "As I said before, team, its time for bed."

The Gryffindor Quidditch team immediately scattered and fled up the stairs to their dormitories. Ginny came over and kissed Harry lightly and then followed them. Only, Ron stayed in the common room. Harry looked pointedly at him until Ron responded surlily, "I don't have to go to bed just because you tell me to, Harry."

Hermione sensed danger as Harry raised his eyebrows expectantly at Ron. Ron's ears turned slightly red and he said again, "I'm not going to bed this early on a Friday night, and you can't make me."

Harry's eyes flashed, and Hermione groaned. Harry smiled icily, "If it comes to making someone do something, Ron, you would be surprised at what I can do. However, if you would like to play Quidditch tomorrow as Gryffindor's keeper, I suggest you get to bed." Harry turned and walked from the common room.

Ron pounded his fist into the chair arm, "Who does he think he is? Ordering me around like some servant."

Hermione replied, "He thinks he's the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. I would do as he says. I think he meant it when he said you wouldn't play."

Ron snorted, "He wouldn't keep me off the pitch."

Hermione shook her head, "I think he would. Ron, just think about some of the things that you have done because you were mad at Harry. You ignored him for a month before the first task of the Triwizard Tournament."

Ron gritted his teeth, "Alright, I'll go to bed, then." He got up from his chair and made his way up the stairs.

The next morning, Harry was up at dawn to go down to the Quidditch pitch. He walked back and forth along the length of the pitch breathing deeply. He began speaking out loud to himself, "I can do this. We're going to win today." Truth be told, Harry was feeling somewhat nervous over the prospect of his first match as captain. He bottled it up, and used the fear he was feeling as a tool. Then, he walked slowly towards the Great Hall. The rest of the team was there eating together. The Slytherins were shooting them nasty glares from across the room. Harry cleared his throat noisily, "I presume you all slept well."

The Gryffindors nodded enthusiastically except for Ron. He continued to look surly. Harry continued, "Well, the match is at eleven. Enjoy your morning, and report to the changing rooms at 10:15 for pre-match. Then, we'll go out and see who's laughing at the end of the day." Harry sat down beside Ginny, who smiled at him sunnily. Harry grinned back, and then dug into his breakfast. The rest of the morning passed quickly, and soon it was time to head down to the pitch.

Harry and Ginny walked in and sat in the captain's office. The rest of the team filed in shortly behind them. They changed quickly, and then settled down for the pre-match pep talk and strategy. Harry stood in front of them, and began to pace back and forth. "Okay, Dean and Seamus, I want the two of you to hammer their chasers like there is no tomorrow. Don't worry about Malfoy. I can handle him. Katie, Natalie, and Ginny, the three of you just work your magic. You know your jobs well. I'm not worried. Ron, you know your job. Guard those hoops, like you think that if someone scores Hermione's going to go to the ball with Malfoy."

Ron looked stunned. The other team members laughed at his consternation. Harry smiled merrily, "Sorry, mate. I couldn't resist. To continue, we're an excellent team. Those stinking Slytherins don't have anything on us. We have won the Quidditch Cup the last two years that it was held, and I see no reason not to repeat that this year. So, when Madam Hooch calls us out, we'll head for the pitch and do our thing. I want to see a clean game. If we need to retaliate against something they do, we'll handle it after the match. I don't want to see them getting any penalty shots."

The team nodded in enthusiasm. The Creevey brothers piped up, "You're awesome, Harry."

Harry chuckled, "I appreciate the sentiment, guys, but in the future tone it down a little."

They nodded meekly, and the others laughed, even Ron. There was some light chatter for a few minutes before it was time for the match to begin. They stepped just outside the changing rooms to await their names to be called.

"This is Owen Cauldwell speaking. I will be your new announcer this year. I would like to introduce the teams for our match today. Here is the Slytherin team." Harry didn't pay much attention to the names being called until he heard, "and their captain and seeker, Draco Malfoy!" Harry shook himself out of his reverie, and exchanged glances with Ron. Ron shrugged his shoulders in response. Apparently neither of them had known that Draco had been made captain. Although they should have realized he was the obvious choice for Snape to make.

"Now, onto the Gryffindor team. Your keeper, Ron Weasley!" The Gryffindors cheered for him. They remembered that it was Ron that had cinched the Cup for them last year. "Your Chasers, Katie Bell! Ginny Weasley! Natalie McDonald!" There was a storm of applause for the three girls. "Your beaters, Dean Thomas! Seamus Finnigan!" Another round of thunderous applause. "And finally, last but definitely not least, your captain and seeker, Harry Potter!" Harry flew out onto the pitch amid the loudest round of applause yet. Here was their hero. The Boy Who Lived.

Harry settled down to the ground in the center of the pitch with Malfoy across from him. The two teams arrayed behind their captains. Madam Hooch came over, "I want a clean game, gentlemen. Captains, shake hands." Malfoy and Harry grasped each other's hands and tried to break the other ones hand. Neither gave and Madam Hooch spoke again, "Take to the air." The teams flew up into a loose circle. Madam Hooch released the Snitch and allowed it to zoom out of sight. Then, she blew her whistle, and released the Quaffle and Bludgers.

Katie immediately took the Quaffle and zoomed for the Slytherin goal. She aimed for the right goal, but then at the last second, reverse passed to Ginny, who neatly tucked it into the left hoop before the Keeper could respond. "Its ten-zero to Gryffindor." Owen shouted.

Malfoy flew alongside Harry, as the two searched for the Snitch. "Its time for you to lose, Potter."

Harry smiled benignly over at Malfoy, "Let me think, Malfoy. You've said something similar to that three times before, and I believe on all three of those occasions, I caught the Snitch. So, I think that I'll just have to catch it, today."

Malfoy merely sneered back at Harry, but didn't comment. The two continued to circle the pitch with Malfoy marking Harry closely. It was apparent that Gryffindor was the superior team, but not by much. Crabbe and Goyle were doing a good job of keeping up with Dean and Seamus. The match had been going on for nearly an hour, and the score was 60-40 to Gryffindor. Harry finally caught sight of the Snitch out of the corner of his right eye. He grinned, and took off to his left. Malfoy was hot on his heels, thinking that Harry had seen the Snitch. Once Harry was sure that Malfoy was near top speed, Harry quickly rolled into a corkscrew maneuver, and changed direction to head for the Snitch. Malfoy had no hope of copying the maneuver, and by the time he had turned around Harry was on the Snitch. A moment later he had caught it.

Madam Hooch blew here whistle signaling the end of the match. Owen Cauldwell announced, "Harry Potter catches the Snitch. Gryffindor wins 210-40." Three quarters of the crowd cheered while the Slytherins booed and left the pitch. The Gryffindors swarmed onto the pitch to celebrate. Harry raised his hands, "Party tonight. I'll handle the food and drink." The Gryffindors continued to cheer all the way back up to the castle.

The rest of the day passed with casual and sporadic cheers from the Gryffindors whenever a member of the team passed. As dinner was ending, Harry leaned over to Ginny and asked, "Do you want to go down to the kitchens with me?"

Ginny looked at him quizzically, "What are we going down to the kitchens for?"

Harry grinned, "I ordered Butterbeers for everyone from Madam Rosmerta a week ago. I had her send them up to the castle, and they have been stored in the kitchen. We've got some sweets from Honeydukes as well. I told Dobby that I would come down to the kitchen to tell him when they needed to be brought up to the common room."

Ginny stared at Harry in amazement, "You planned all of this a week ago?"

Harry nodded, "I had faith."

Ginny smiled, "I can tell. Sure, I would love to go down to the kitchens. I've never met Dobby."

Harry chuckled, "That's probably a good thing. He tends to be a little bit excitable. He could give the Creevey brothers a run for their money in the biggest Harry Potter Fan competition."

Ginny laughed as the two left the Great Hall and headed for the kitchens. Harry stopped in front of the portrait of fruit. He tickled the pear and it turned into a doorknob. He entered the kitchen, and the instant he stepped in, he was almost knocked from his feet by Dobby. "Harry Potter came to see Dobby. Harry Potter came to see Dobby." Harry managed to extricate himself from the House Elf's embrace. Ginny smiled at him. Dobby looked over to Ginny and asked, "Harry Potter, sir, who is you bringing with you? Who is this Missus?"

Harry smiled, "Dobby, this is my girlfriend, Ginny Weasley."

Dobby almost bounced up and down in excitement, "Harry Potter is a great wizard, Missus Wheazy must be a great witch to be Harry Potter's girlfriend."

Ginny blushed at the praise being heaped on her by the overenthusiastic House Elf. Harry almost laughed at her discomfiture, but managed to contain himself. "Dobby, I came down here to tell you that we need the Butterbeers and sweets that I had sent up from the village. Would it be possible for you and some of the other House Elves to take the stuff up to Gryffindor common room."

Dobby stopped for a moment, "I is doing it gladly, Harry Potter, sir. The other elves is insulted by the clothes that were being left last year."

Harry smiled, "You can tell them that no one is going to offer them clothes. They are welcome in Gryffindor tower at all times."

Dobby nodded, "I is getting to it right away, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is glad to meet you, Missus Wheazy." Dobby ran off to get the stuff, and Harry shook his head in amusement.

Harry and Ginny then left the kitchen, and headed for the tower and the party. By the time that the two had gotten to the common room, Dobby and the other elves had delivered all of the party goods. The other Gryffindors were ecstatic. Dean looked at Harry, "How did you pull this off?"

"I have to have some secrets." Harry replied mysteriously.

The party got into full swing before Hermione came over to him and asked, "Harry, did you break rules to go get this stuff?"

Harry snorted, "Hermione, you worry about the rules entirely too much, but to ease your conscience, no I didn't break any rules. I placed the order with Madam Rosmerta a week ago."

Hermione looked relieved. Harry just shook his head in exasperation and walked away from her. She looked hurt for a moment, but Ron walked up beside her. The party carried on well into the night. Finally, Professor McGonagall showed up to yell at everyone and get them to bed.

The entire tower grumbled, but finally made their way up to the dormitories, and the tower settled down for the night.

14. The Ball

The rest of the month of November and then the beginning of December flew by. The Gryffindors balanced their time between homework, class, and dueling club practice. Harry was very proud of their progress with the sword techniques that he had been teaching them. Harry continued to spend time with Ginny in his phoenix form. He also spent time running through the Forbidden Forest in his panther form. He also spent time eavesdropping on the other members of Gryffindor in his chameleon form. Soon, it was the final week of term before the Christmas break. The Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione would be spending the holidays at Grimmauld Place.

The last dueling club meeting of the term was actually quite festive. With Dobby's help, Harry had hung wreaths around the room, and put up a rather large Christmas tree. The students filed in, and looked around at the room. Harry stepped up onto the platform and announced, "I've decided that we are going to have a little exhibition match this evening. I think that it is time for all of you to see how to combine magic and swordplay in dueling. I would like for three volunteers to come forward."

Ron raised his hand quickly, "I'll do it." Harry nodded and motioned him forward. Justin Finch-Fletchley volunteered as well. Then, to everyone's surprise, Neville jumped onto the platform.

Harry smiled, "Now, what I want the three of you to do is keep your sword in your strong hand. Use your wand in your off hand. The three of you will face me at the same time. This lends an air of difficulty to the task. Since the three of you are working together, you must take care not to injure your allies. Tonks will be judging wounds that would be created by the swords. If you are called with a mortal wound, you are out of the fight. If you are disarmed of both sword and wand, then you are out of the fight. If Tonks awards an arm wound, then you must drop the weapon in that hand. If she judges a leg wound, then you may longer walk. Any questions?"

The other three shook their heads, and then exchanged glances among them. They spread out into a triangle formation around Harry. He looked over to Tonks, and said, "Tell us when to begin."

Ginny leaned over to Hermione and whispered, "I put a Galleon on Harry to win."

Hermione smiled back at her, "No bet. I figure he will. He wouldn't put himself in a situation where he thought he might lose."

Tonks yelled, "Begin."

Before the other three could even begin to move, Harry had lashed out at Ron. He disarmed him of his sword, and then hit him with a full body bind. Neville attacked Harry from behind, and the two crossed swords, while Justin removed the curse from Ron. Ron leaped to his feet, and shouted, "Expelliarmus." Harry reversed Neville's sword up and over his own head, and twisted out of the way of Ron's Disarming Charm. It hit Neville, and sent his sword flying. Harry struck in the blink of an eye and Tonks called out, "Left arm wound, Neville."

Neville immediately dropped his wand, but dove and picked it up with his right, while rolling back to his feet. Harry turned to meet the lunging attack of Justin, which he rolled his sword around, so that he could dive under the Stunning Spells that Ron had hurled at him. Ron retrieved his sword, and then he and Justin advanced on Harry, while Neville hung back. Dumbledore walked into the room, and asked Tonks, "What is going on?"

Tonks never took her eyes from the fight, "Harry is fighting Ron, Neville, and Justin at the same time. Practice swords and wands."

Dumbledore began watching the battle as intently as everyone else in the room. In the short space of time that Dumbledore had spoken to Tonks, Ron and Justin had hurled Tickling Charms and Leg Tangling Charms at Harry. Harry merely vaulted into the air and flipped over them landing within a couple of feet of the two. He crossed swords with Ron, again. In a matter of seconds, he sent Ron's sword flying. The movement cost him, however, as Justin caught him a grazing blow to the hip. Tonks called out, "Hip wound, Harry. No more jumping." Harry continued his offensive against Justin. Neville and Ron threw Stunning Spells at him, but Harry whipped his left hand around, "Protego." he called. The curses were deflected away as he disarmed Justin of his sword and kicked his wand from his hand. Harry immediately turned to the two other threats and sent a series of curses flying at them. "Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Ron and Neville dodged the curses, but while they were doing it, Harry called out, "Accio sword." Ron's sword flew up from the ground and hit Ron in the back. Tonks yelled out, "Mortal wound, Mr. Weasley." Ron groaned as he jumped lightly from the platform, rubbing his back. Harry used his advantage quickly and struck Justin in the chest, while he was retrieving his wand.

Tonks called out again, "Mortal wound, Mr. Finch-Fletchley." Justin smiled, and jumped from the platform. Harry stopped, and waved his wand. He spoke, "Tonks, we're going to say that I just healed both myself and Mr. Longbottom. He may retrieve his sword." Tonks nodded as Neville switched his wand to his left hand, and then picked up his sword.

Harry smiled and bowed his head slightly to Neville. Neville returned the gesture. Harry said, "Well, Mr. Longbottom, you seem to be the last of my foes. Let us see what you are capable of."

Neville gulped, but stood his ground. Harry lunged for him. Neville blocked several blows moderately skillfully, and then dove sideways leaving Harry overstepping with nothing to slow his momentum. Neville quickly shouted, "Expelliarmus!" He followed this just as quickly with, "Stupefy!" Harry took the Disarming Charm, and let his wand and sword go flying. He did a quick back handspring to dodge the Stunning Spell, and catch his own wand as it fell. He spun it as he landed and sent a spell back at Neville as Neville tried to regain his feet. "Stupefy!" The spell caught Neville square in the chest. Harry walked over and said, "Ennervate."

Neville got up and grinned at Harry sheepishly, "I tried."

Harry smiled back at him, "You performed excellently, Mr. Longbottom. Rarely is there a wizard that can balance swordplay and wandmanship so well."

Neville looked at Harry, "You can."

Harry shrugged, "I am an exception to the rule. Let's leave it at that."

Harry and Neville stood side by side. Harry motioned for Justin and Ron to join them. The entire audience was watching in utter amazement, and had yet to make a sound. Harry looked around the room, "Let's give a big round of applause for our volunteers."

The room exploded into clapping and hooting. Dumbledore looked at Tonks, "I think that Harry is going to have to begin restricting his opponents to teachers."

Tonks snorted, "No offense to the faculty, Dumbledore, but I doubt that any of us could keep up with him. I know that I wouldn't like the idea of being his enemy."

Dumbledore responded, "Yes, young Mr. Potter is gaining power very quickly. I just hope that it doesn't go to his head."

Tonks smiled, "Don't worry. Harry may have a temper, but he will never take You-Know-Who's path. He's too pure of heart. He cares too much."

Dumbledore nodded and returned Tonks' smile, "Yes, I know. I don't truly doubt him, but it is disturbing to think of the burden and responsibility that has been cast onto his shoulders at such a young age. Most full-grown wizards would never be able to cope. Yet, here he stands."

The two were interrupted, "Yes, well, Mr. Potter is a remarkable young man."

They looked to see Professor McGonagall standing behind them. Tonks seemed surprised, "How long have you been here?"

McGonagall replied, "Long enough."

While this conversation was proceeding, Harry was announcing to the dueling club, "That is all we will be doing this evening. I know that you are not allowed to do magic at home during the holidays. However, I would like all of you to practice wand movement in your off hand over the holidays. This will prepare you for training in combat like you just witnessed."

Everyone started filing out of the room, and Harry made his way over to the three professors. Ginny joined him. He smiled down at her. Then, he looked to the professors and asked, "So, what did you think?"

Tonks smiled enthusiastically, "That was amazing, Harry. I didn't know that you were that fast."

Harry smiled patronizingly, "Thank you."

Ginny looked at Harry, "Neville almost got you, though."

Harry nodded, "Yes, he did exceptionally well. Better than I expected considering we haven't done any training with balancing the two."

Dumbledore looked piercingly at Harry, "You were holding back, I assume."

"Of course I was. It wouldn't have been much of a show if I had ended it in thirty seconds. That would have just been showing off." replied Harry.

Ginny looked at him in shock, "You mean you were holding back. You can do better than that."

Harry nodded, and Ginny just shook her head in amazement. The professors smiled. "I think that I'm going back to the tower." said Harry dryly.

Harry and Ginny left hand in hand. The three professors smiled at the two as they left. Ginny continued to look at Harry in goggle-eyed amazement. Harry glanced over his shoulder at her, "If you're going to continue to look at me like that, I think that I am going to leave you standing here."

Ginny snapped out of her shock and said, "Just how powerful are you, Harry?"

Harry sighed, and stopped in the corridor. He pulled Ginny into his arms and asked, "Does it really matter?"

Ginny shook her head, "No, Harry, I love you no matter what. I'm just curious."

Harry nodded, "Okay, but this goes no further than the two of us. You already know too much about my abilities as it is. Right now, I could give Professor Dumbledore a run for his money."

The two kissed, and then continued on their way up to the tower. After they had left the corridor, Malfoy stepped out and smiled to himself, "My Lord will reward me greatly for this information."

The next morning was filled with conversations about the duel the night before. Basically everyone seemed to be very impressed with Neville. Luna was sitting at the Gryffindor table with him at breakfast. Harry smiled when he saw them. "Good morning."

The two returned his greeting and then turned their attention back to each other. Harry sat down beside Ginny. Ginny looked at Hermione, "I wonder who's taking whom to the dance tonight."

Hermione shrugged, "I don't much care. I have my date."

Harry nodded, "I feel the same way. I made sure I had the perfect date on our second day at Hogwarts."

Ginny looked over at him, "Oh, so I'm perfect, now."

Harry snorted, "What are you talking about, now? You've been perfect since the first day I laid eyes on you."

Ginny smiled slyly, “What day was that, Mr. Potter?”

Harry grinned just as slyly, “September 1, 1991. It was at King’s Cross Station just before I began my first term at Hogwarts. You didn’t even know who I was until I was already on the train.”

“I guess that I am just going to have to come up with a harder question, Mr. Potter.” returned Ginny.

Harry leaned sideways onto the table and looked at her, “Bring it on. Give me your best shot, Miss Weasley.”

Hermione smiled, “I think that you’re biting off more than you can chew there, Harry.”

Ron jumped in, “Yeah, mate. Ginny could probably come up with something that you would never remember.”

Harry shrugged and looked expectantly at Ginny, “Well?”

“Okay, here it is. What was the first thing that I ever said to you?” asked Ginny.

Harry snorted, “Is that the best you’ve got? Would you like to know the first thing that you said directly to me, the first thing you said in front of me knowingly, or the first thing you said in front of me period?”

Ginny and Hermione’s eyes widened and they exchanged glances. Ginny swallowed and said, “Since you think you’re so good, let’s hear all three.”

“Okay. The first thing that you ever said directly to me were the words ‘I’ve got to tell you something’. You had just sat down next to Ron and I during your first year at Hogwarts. The first thing that you ever knowingly said in front of me was in Flourish and Blott’s before your first year at Hogwarts. Gilderoy Lockheart had just made his little performance with me, and Malfoy made a snide comment about it. I believe you said ‘Leave him alone, he didn’t want all that’. The first time you ever spoke in front of me was on September 1, 1991. I had just arrived at King’s Cross, and you and your brothers were heading towards Platform 9 ¾ with your mother. She asked what the platform number was, and you said, ‘Nine and three-quarters! Mom, can’t I go?’. So, is there anything else that you care to know?”

The other five students sitting around Harry stared in amazement. They could tell by the expression on Ginny’s face that Harry was right. Ginny was almost in tears. “How did you remember all of that?”

Harry smiled, “I remember everything that concerns you, Ginny. I remember it like it happened yesterday.”

Ginny broke down completely into tears, and ran from the room. Harry looked over at Hermione, “Go check on her. I don’t know if she’s going to want to talk to me right now.”

Hermione nodded, and she got up to follow Ginny. Harry turned to Neville and Luna, “So, are the two of you going to the ball together tonight?”

Neville blushed and nodded sheepishly. Luna just gave one her goofy smiles. Ron looked at Harry in disgust, “How can you just forget about my sister that quickly? She just ran out of here in tears, and you act like nothing happened.”

Harry sighed in exasperation, “Ron, you really do have a lot to learn about girls. Those were good tears. She was happy.”

Ron looked annoyed, “What are you talking about? If she was happy, why was she crying?”

“Because I just showed her how much attention that I have actually paid to her over the years. She has always thought that I didn’t notice her, and that was why I have never asked her out till this year. I just showed her that I have always noticed her. She realized that what I told her was true.” explained Harry.

“What did you tell her?” asked Ron.

“I told her one time that the only reason I hadn’t asked her out sooner was because she was so shy that I couldn’t really get to know her. She thought I was teasing her. She just realized I wasn’t.” continued Harry.

Ron looked confused, “Then, she is upset.”

“Yes, and no. She’s upset at herself slightly because she didn’t get over her shyness sooner, but she’s also exceptionally happy because she knows how much I love her.”

Ron put his hands on his head, “I don’t understand this. How do you know anyway?”

Harry shrugged, “Weren’t you paying attention when Hermione was giving us lessons in how girls think last year?”

Ron snorted, “Nothing she ever said on the subject made the slightest bit of sense to me.”

Harry shook his head, “It didn’t to me last year either. Somewhere between then and now though, it just started to make sense. Let’s head to class. We don’t want to be late for DADA. Professor Tonks would be highly upset.”

Ron laughed, “Its been an entire term, and I still can’t get used to hearing the word Professor in front of her name.”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, it is a bit weird.”

As the two left the Great Hall, Ginny came running up to Harry. She grabbed him in a hug and then kissed him quickly, “I love you, Mr. Potter.”

Harry smiled back, “And I you, Miss Weasley.”

Hermione smiled over at them as Ginny quickly took off down the corridor. “Can I ask you something, Harry?”

“Of course.” he answered.

“Why did you and Ginny start calling each other Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter?” asked Hermione.

Harry shrugged, “I don’t know that there is a reason behind it. She called me Mr. Potter when she was mad at me in the hospital wing. I called her Miss Weasley to be patronizing, and it just stuck.”

Ron laughed, as Hermione wrinkled her nose and smirked in amusement. The three walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and the conversation ended as they took their seats and waited for Professor Tonks to enter the room and begin the last lesson of the term.

After Defense Against the Dark Arts was over, the Gryffindors headed for lunch. Harry met Ginny outside the Great Hall. He looked at her, “All better now?”

She smiled, “Yes, I am.”

“Ready for the ball tonight?” asked Harry.

She shook her head, “No, its going to take me a long time to make myself pretty enough for the ball.”

Harry looked left and right quickly, “You’re going to make yourself look better than you do right now?”

Ginny nodded, perplexed. “Of course.”

Harry shook his head violently, “I forbid it. You’re already the most beautiful girl in all of Hogwarts. If you make yourself look any better, I’m going to have to spend the entire night fighting all the other boys in the school off. I won’t get to enjoy the ball with you.”

Ron, Hermione, and Neville laughed at the completely dumbfounded expression on Ginny’s face. She didn’t reply but smiled dazedly and allowed Harry to lead her into the hall for lunch.

The afternoon was not as enjoyable as the morning since Harry and Hermione had Potions with Snape.

Snape entered the classroom, and said, “Today, we will be brewing an antidote that is useful for several different types of snake venoms. Now, what are the two major problems with antidotes?”

Hermione and surprisingly Harry raised their hands. “Miss Granger?”

“Most antidotes have very defined characteristics. They are only useful for a few poisons if more than one. This is a major limitation for their use.” answered Hermione.

Snape furrowed his brow, “That is correct. Now, can any of you tell me the other major problem with antidotes?”

Only Harry raised his hand this time. Snape had no choice but to call on him. “Yes, Potter.”

Harry cleared his throat, “The other major problem with antidotes is that most of them are poisonous in nature themselves. The only safe time to ingest most antidotes is if you have the poison that they were intended to cure in your system. If you ingest an antidote, the only way to nullify its affects is to poison yourself with the poison it was intended to cure. This is a great limitation. It makes it absolutely necessary to know what kind of poison was ingested before you can attempt to use a cure.”

The classroom was stunned. No one more so than Snape. Hermione looked from Harry to Professor Snape and asked, “Is this true, Professor?”

Professor Snape nodded dumbly, “Yes, it is.” He flicked his wand at the board. “There are your instructions for the day.”

Hermione muttered to Harry, “How did you know that?”

Harry merely smiled as the two set to work on the very complex potion.

The bell rang some time later. As the class was packing up their cauldrons and preparing to leave, Snape called out, “Potter, you will remain behind after class.”

Hermione looked at Harry, “Do you want me to wait?”

Harry shook his head, “No, I’m fine. I’ll catch up to you and the others in the common room.” Harry walked back towards Snape’s desk and waited.

Once all the other students had filed from the room, Snape looked at Harry. “I heard about your little duel last night. I have to ask a question. You have said on numerous occasions that you are going to kill the Dark Lord. I know the Prophecy has said that you have the power to do so. What I want to know is, can you really do it?”

Harry paused for a moment to consider his answer, “Right now, if Voldemort were to attack me, I honestly don’t know which of us would win.”

“Why not?”

“Well, neither one of us can be killed by ordinary means. It’s all a matter of who discovers a more powerful method to inflict death.” answered Harry.

Snape looked puzzled, “What do you mean that neither of you can be killed by ordinary means, Potter? You’re both still human.”

Harry snorted, “Not really. I’m hardly normal, and Voldemort has been through so many magical transformations that he can only be called human by the wildest stretch of the imagination. As far as ordinary means goes, I meant that the Killing Curse cannot kill either of us.”

Snape’s eyes widened, “Are you serious?”

Harry nodded, “If a normal wizard cast the Killing Curse on either of us, it would probably just bounce off. A more powerful wizard casting it, would rob us of our bodies, but it wouldn’t kill us.”

Snape drew a ragged breath, “Very well. You may go, Potter.”

Harry turned and picked up his cauldron, and walked toward the back of the classroom.

Snape called out, “By the way, Potter.” Harry turned to look at him. “Ten points to Gryffindor for your knowledge of antidotes.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and smiled, but made no comment. He left the room, a little wiser than he had entered it. Harry walked into the common room to see Ron and Hermione waiting on him. Ginny had not yet got out of class for the afternoon. Harry sat down beside them.

Ron looked at him expectantly, “So, spit it out. Hermione said that that grease ball Snape held you back after class.”

Harry interrupted him, “Professor Snape, Ron.”

Ron looked confused, while Hermione appeared to be amazed. Ron asked, “What?”

Harry repeated, “Professor Snape is his title.”

Ron shrugged, “So, I’ve always called him greasy.”

Harry nodded, “I know, but its time you stopped.”

Ron laughed, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Harry shook his head, “I assure you that I am not.”

Ron relented, “Okay, fine. What did Professor Snape want you to stay behind for?”

Harry shrugged, “He just wanted to ask me some questions. He also awarded ten points to Gryffindor.”

Ron seemed like he was about to ask a question, but he stopped. “Snape gave Gryffindor points. You’re joking.” Ron exclaimed.

Hermione was not to be dissuaded from the target so easily, “What did Snape want to ask you?”

Harry sighed, “Nothing that concerns either of you.”

Hermione looked offended, “Harry, I’m getting really tired of this. We deserve to know.”

Harry shook his head, “You’re not ready.”

Ron looked at him, “Harry, we understand that some things are worth dying for.”

“Perhaps you do, Ron. Are you ready to die for those things? Are you ready to watch Hermione die? Are you ready to watch Ginny die? Are you ready to watch your parents die? Are you ready to watch your brothers die? Are you ready to watch me die? Are you ready to kill someone? To take another life? To know that someone will never wake up in the morning to hear birds sing, and that you are the reason that they won’t?” asked Harry relentlessly.

Ron paled under the scrutiny that Harry was placing on him. Harry switched his gaze to Hermione, who quailed under the fury in his stare. Ron gulped and said quietly, “I don’t want any of my family to die.”

Hermione broke down into tears at the lost sound in Ron’s voice. Harry stood up with his stuff and said quietly, “As I have stated before, you are not ready.” Harry then walked up the stairs to the dormitory.

Ron pulled Hermione into a hug, while the other Gryffindors that were in the room looked at them in consternation.

Ginny came in just a bit later. She looked at Ron and Hermione, who were sitting in each other’s arms. “What’s wrong?”

Ron looked up at her, “We tried to force Harry to tell us about things. It wasn’t pretty.”

Ginny looked at Ron in disgust, “How mad was he?”

Ron shook his head, “He wasn’t mad. It was worse. It was almost like he was disappointed.” Ron shuddered.

Ginny's eyes widened at the look on Ron's face. She saw that Hermione had been crying for awhile. She smiled down at them, "Come on, it will be alright. The ball is tonight. We don't have to worry about You-Know-Who for a few hours at least."

Ron and Hermione nodded. Ginny smiled, "Let's get a snowball fight going on outside. Ron, you go get Harry, and Hermione and I will get ready."

Ron took off up the stairs to the sixth year boys dormitory. There he found Harry about to disappear under his invisibility cloak. "Where are you going?"

Harry grinned, "To Hogsmeade."

Ron shook his head, "Hermione will have a fit if she finds out you're sneaking out of the castle. Besides Ginny wants us to have a snowball fight before the ball."

Harry shook his head, "You'll just have to tell them that I will be out in a short while. I've got to go pick up Ginny's Christmas present. I ordered it through a catalog, but I want to pick it up, so that I can make sure its perfect. Hermione will just have to get over it. Its not like she can do anything about it, anyway."

Ron grinned, "Well, she actually can. Hermione and I are prefects. We can give you detention for breaking rules."

"Not when I have special permission from the Headmaster to go. He just told me to sneak out, so that I wouldn't call too much attention to the fact that I was getting special treatment." replied Harry.

Ron shook his head, "You get away with everything."

Harry looked annoyed, "Yeah, sure, I get away with everything. I guess that's why I have a scar on the back of my hand in the shape of the words 'I will not tell lies.'"

Ron looked chastened, "Good point. I'll tell the girls that you'll join us in a little while."

Harry flashed one last grin, and then disappeared under the cloak. Ron walked back downstairs, and waited for the girls. Ginny looked around, "Where's Harry?"

Ron answered, "He had something to go do. He said that he will join us in a little while. Let's find Neville and Luna."

The three Gryffindors tracked Neville and Luna down outside. The three girls took on the two boys for awhile. Within about forty-five minutes, Harry showed up. The boys trashed the girls once Harry joined their team. He kept bewitching snowballs to fly in arcs and hit the girls in the backs. After another half-an-hour or so the girls left to get ready for the ball. The three boys continued for another hour, and then headed for the tower.

Ron asked Harry, "So, did you get it?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah, I've got it hid."

"What is it?" asked Ron.

Harry shook his head, "Nope, its going to be a surprise for everyone. You had better not tell Ginny I got her anything either. She still thinks that the dress robes are her Christmas present. I want to really surprise her."

Ron nodded, "Alright. I won't tell her."

Neville asked, "What are we talking about?"

Ron grinned, "Harry bought Ginny's dress robes for the ball. She thinks that the robes are supposed to be her Christmas present. Harry got her something else, though. So, she's going to be surprised come Christmas morning to say the least."

Neville laughed, "I guess so. You're just a little bit devious, Harry."

Harry chuckled, "I know. It's a lot of fun, though."

The boys went upstairs to get ready. They came down to the common room and waited with all the other boys that had dates in their own house. Finally, girls began to make their way down the stairs. Ginny and Hermione were in the first few girls down. Ron just gaped at his sister and his girlfriend. Harry smiled broadly. Hermione was dressed in robes very similar to the ones she had worn to the Yule Ball two years earlier. They were a slightly darker blue than the periwinkle of two years ago. She had her hair done similarly as well. It was up in a twist. All in all, she looked magnificent.

Ginny took Harry's breath away, however. The robes appeared as if they had been made from liquid gold that had been poured and molded around Ginny's slight frame. Her hair was in an elegant sweep, and she had placed just enough make-up on her face to enhance her already lovely features. Harry swept into a bow before Ginny. "I would be honored if you would allow me to accompany you to the dance, Milady. Your beauty would charm the foulest creature, and if there is a man on this planet that would not risk everything that he has merely to get a glimpse of you, then he should be put to death for his stupidity."

Ginny smiled widely, even as she flushed slightly. "I would be honored to have a man as eloquent and handsome as yourself escort me to the ball."

Ron finally managed to blurt out, "Hermione, you look great."

She smiled, but looked over to Harry and Ginny with just a hint of jealousy. She turned back to Ron, "Thank you, Ron."

Ron looked slightly uncomfortable. "I know I'm not as good at talking as Harry, but.." He stopped as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Harry grinned at Ron, "It's the sentiment that counts, Ron. The words are just dressing."

Ginny and Hermione nodded in agreement. The four walked downstairs, and met up with Luna and Neville. Neville appeared quite polished in robes of a dark blood red. Luna was quite pretty dressed in robes of a pastel blue and white.

The six students waited for the doors to the Great Hall to open. At 7:30, the doors opened wide and the students began to file in. Harry stopped as he heard Malfoy's voice ring out, "What are you doing now, Potter, taking up charity cases? I didn't think that the weasels could afford new clothes." Several Slytherins laughed.

Harry took a menacing step towards Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their arms, and prepared for a fight. Harry said softly, where only Malfoy and the few people surrounding him could hear, "I am not going to ruin the ball by starting a fight right here, but be warned. I have caught your father twice, Malfoy. The next time I see him, he dies. As for you and your little band of cohorts, pray that I don't catch you in a corridor where there are no witnesses. If I do, you will experience horrors that would make the Cruciatus Curse seem kind in comparison. I suggest that none of you ever speak to me or any of my friends ever again."

The group of Slytherins around Malfoy all paled. Crabbe and Goyle looked uncertain. Malfoy gulped in trepidation at the threat. "Let's go." said Malfoy.

Harry stepped back over to Ginny. She looked at him in concern, "What did you say to him?"

Harry shook his head, "It doesn't matter. I don't think that he will be insulting any of us for a while, though." The five other students exchanged glances, but refrained from comment.

Harry smiled at them, “Let’s just enjoy the ball.” The six walked into the Great Hall together. As before the house tables had vanished, and the room was filled with small tables that would seat about six or eight. The group found an empty table, and sat down. Once everyone was seated, the menus appeared. Everyone placed their orders and the food appeared on their plates. Banter flew around the tables during the meal. Finally, however, it was time for the dancing to begin. The band came out onto the stage, and started setting up to play. Hermione looked askance at Ron, because she knew that he hadn’t danced at the last ball. Ron looked at his feet, because he knew he didn’t know how to dance. Neville was copying Ron’s look for much the same reason. Luna appeared to be off in space somewhere. Ginny remembered her experience dancing with Neville two years ago, and thought disappointedly that Harry probably wouldn’t be any better. He had only danced once with Parvati at the last ball. Harry, however, stood up confidently. Harry had been keeping up with his dance practicing throughout the term.

“May I have this dance?” asked Harry as he extended his hand.

Ginny smiled hesitantly, “Of course.”

The two of them walked out onto the dance floor as the band began playing its first song. Ginny winced in anticipation of having her toes stepped on. It was for no reason, however. Harry spun her around easily and the two began to dance. Ginny looked into Harry’s eyes in undisguised surprise and admiration. “I didn’t know that you could dance.”

Harry smiled, “I couldn’t before now. I’ve been using a dancing charm to practice all term.”

Ginny gasped, “You’re kidding me.”

Harry shook his head, “I knew that Neville stepped on your toes a lot at the last ball. I didn’t want you to have a repeat performance.”

“You mean you did this for me.”

Harry nodded, “Of course. I would do anything for you, Ginny.”

Ginny just smiled, and stepped closer to Harry as the two moved to the music.

Hermione finally got Ron onto the dance floor. Neville and Luna danced a few times. The night passed in a haze of laughter and dancing. Towards the end of the dance, Harry asked Ginny, “Would you like to go outside to look at the stars?”

Ginny nodded and the two headed outside. The began walking around the grounds. After a bit of time Harry felt a coldness that had nothing to do with the air touch him. Ginny shivered beside him. “Harry, I feel funny.”

It hit Harry what was happening, “Dementors.” Ginny looked frightened. Harry pushed her down behind a bush as he drew his wand. “Stay here. I’m going to find them.” He stood up and began walking sideways away from Ginny. He spotted three dementors, and was preparing to cast the Patronus Charm when he heard a shout behind him.

“Harry.”

He spun around and saw three more dementors converging on Ginny. Harry screamed at the top of his lungs, “Expecto Patronum.” Three stags shot from the end of his wand. They charged down the three dementors surrounding Ginny and sent them flying. Then, they turned on the other three, and sent them on their way as well.

Harry rushed over to Ginny as his Patroni faded from existence. “I’m so sorry, Ginny. Are you okay?”

Ginny nodded as she continued crying. Harry helped her to her feet, and they walked back into the entrance hall. “Stay here, Ginny. I’ll be back in just a moment.”

Harry rushed into the Great Hall. He tapped his wand against his throat, “Sonus. Everyone, quiet.” Harry’s magnified voice boomed through the Hall. The music died, and the entire student body turned to look at him. “I want all the students to return to their common rooms. No one go off by themselves. Teachers to me.” No one moved. “Those were orders, people. Move.” This finally spurred the students into action. Once they were out of the Great Hall, Harry tapped his wand to his throat again, “Quietus.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry in concern, “What is going on, Harry?”

“Dementors were on the grounds, sir.” replied Harry evenly. “I’m taking Ginny up to the common room, and then we need to go back out and make sure there aren’t anymore.”

Dumbledore nodded, “We will begin the search now. Professors.” The staff followed Dumbledore from the Hall.

Harry walked over to Ginny. “Come on, sweetheart. I have to take you back to the common room.” Harry hurried Ginny up the stairs. Once they reached the portrait hole, Harry gave the password to the Fat Lady, and then kissed Ginny. “I’m going back out to help the teachers search the grounds.”

Ginny clutched Harry by the arm. “Don’t go, Harry. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Harry smiled as he removed her hand from his arm, “Don’t worry, Ginny. It will take a lot more than a Dementor to harm me.” He quickly sped down the hall out of sight.

Ginny climbed through the portrait hole. She was immediately set upon by Hermione, Ron, and Neville. Hermione demanded, “What’s going on?”

Ginny sniffled, “There were Dementors outside. Harry fought them off, and now he and the professors are outside looking to see if there are any more of them.”

Ron looked askance, “Dementors. Are you serious?”

Ginny nodded, “I’m going upstairs to get out of these dress robes. Then, I’m coming back down to wait for Harry.” Ginny headed for the girl’s dormitories. Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance before Hermione followed her up the stairs. Ron and Neville went to change, themselves.

After Harry had left Ginny outside the portrait hole, he jumped out the nearest window and transformed into a phoenix. He flew to the ground and then transformed back into human form. He ran up to Dumbledore, “Have you found anymore of them, sir?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, Harry, we haven’t located any Dementors on the grounds. They could be hiding in the forest, however.”

Harry nodded, “Yes, it would be quite easy for them to hide there. I guess I’ll have to go look for them.”

Dumbledore dissented, “Harry, I don’t think that is a good idea.”

Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore as McGonagall and Snape walked up, “The subject is not open to debate, Professor. If there is something on the grounds that threatens the lives of the people I care about, then I intend to get rid of it.” Harry then ran off into the forest.

Snape looked at Dumbledore, “Are you just going to let the boy go?”

Dumbledore shrugged, “It doesn’t appear as if I can stop him.”

McGonagall looked anxious, “Do you think that he will be alright, Albus?”

Dumbledore smiled, “As to that, I can assure you that Harry will be fine. As long as Voldemort himself has not dared to come onto the grounds. Then, Harry will run. He knows that he can’t kill Voldemort yet.”

Snape mused, “The question is, can the Dark Lord kill Potter?”

Dumbledore looked grim, “That is a question that not even Harry can answer. We can only hope that the answer is no.”

The three professors waited for Harry long after the rest of the staff had returned to the castle. Finally, Harry came out of the forest. He had an arrow stuck in his arm. The three rushed over to him. McGonagall asked quickly, "Potter, are you alright?"

Harry responded irritably, "I'm fine. One of those idiotic centaurs mistook me for prey."

Snape snorted, "I hardly think that any centaur is misguided enough to think that a human was prey."

"Normally you would be correct, Professor Snape, but since I didn't look like a human at the time he shot me, the mistake was understandable." replied Harry dryly.

Dumbledore asked, "Did you find any other Dementors, Harry?"

The party of four began to walk back towards the castle. Harry shook his head in exasperation, "No, I couldn't even pick up the scent of one. The six that I fought off must have been it."

Snape interrupted in a confused voice, "What are you talking about, Potter? First, you said that you didn't look like a human, and then you spoke of picking up a scent of Dementors. I demand to know what is going on?"

Harry waved his hand, "Calm down, Professor. This isn't common knowledge. In fact, the only people that know are Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Professor Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall. I guess that you will make six. I am an unregistered Animagus."

Snape only managed one word, "Impossible."

Harry snorted, "You know, I hear that word a lot when it comes to things that I can do. I don't get it really. Everything that I can do, has been done by other wizards. So, I don't see why anyone would consider these things impossible."

Dumbledore smiled mysteriously, "That's not completely true, Harry. You can do one thing that no one has ever done."

Harry shook his head, "We don't know that it has never been done. It simply has never been recorded."

Snape persisted, "Now, what are you talking about?"

Harry shook his head again, "I am afraid that little secret will have to wait for another time. Occlumency or not, we can't afford to give Voldemort the chance to find out about too many of my abilities."

Snape looked as if he were about to ask again, when Dumbledore shook his head warningly. The four of them reached the Hospital Wing and Harry removed the sleeve of his dress robes so that Madam Pomfrey could inspect the wound. She clucked her tongue, and asked, "Exactly how did this happen, Mr. Potter?"

Harry responded, "I was in the Forbidden Forest looking for Dementors, and one of the centaurs shot me by accident."

Madam Pomfrey said disapprovingly, "Running around in the forest. What is this school coming to?" She removed the arrow from Harry's arm. She applied some sort of orange substance to the wound, and it hissed. She then tapped her wand against it and the wound disappeared.

Harry grinned, "Thanks, Madam Pomfrey." He got up and started walking for the door.

Madam Pomfrey called him back, "I think that it would be better if you stayed the night in the hospital wing, Mr. Potter."

Harry shook his head, "I'm fine, Madam Pomfrey. That wasn't any worse than the cut I took from that stupid Horntail two years ago. I didn't spend any time in the hospital wing, then."

Dumbledore said in concern, "Perhaps you should spend the night, Harry."

Harry answered, "I don't think that I need to stay, Professor. Unless you want a fiery tempered Weasley knocking the door to your office off, I suggest you stop holding me up and let me get back to Gryffindor tower. It's after one o'clock in the morning, and you all know that she's going to be waiting up for me to get back to the common room."

Dumbledore nodded, "Good point. Get back to the tower."

Harry nodded, and left the room at a run. He arrived back at the portrait hole in record time. He gave the Fat Lady the password and rushed into the common room. Ron, Hermione, and Neville were lying asleep on various chairs around the fire. Ginny was sitting in one chair looking straight at Harry. She jumped up and rushed across the common room into his arms. The two kissed for several minutes before Ginny stepped back from him and slapped him in the face. Then, she kissed him again.

Harry finally broke the kiss and asked, "What exactly did you slap me for?"

Ginny looked a little ashamed but answered, "You worried me. What took you so long?"

Harry smiled, "I'm sorry, but I had to make sure there were no more of them. The reason it took so long was that I had to go to the Hospital Wing."

Ginny immediately looked concerned, "Are you alright? I knew you were going to get hurt."

"Relax, Ginny, I'm fine. One of the centaurs accidentally shot me in the arm. Madam Pomfrey mended it easily. I'm as fit as a fiddle." answered Harry.

Ginny sighed, "I'm just really glad that you're okay."

Harry smiled again, "I know, Ginny. I feel the same way about you. It amazes me."

Ginny looked puzzled, "What amazes you?"

Harry smirked, "That Dumbledore was wrong."

"What was Dumbledore wrong about?"

"Do you remember the second task of the Triwizard Tournament?" asked Harry.

Ginny nodded, "Of course. You had to go into the lake."

"Yes. The Merpeople were supposed to have stolen the thing that I would miss the most." continued Harry.

Ginny looked perplexed by now, "What has any of this got to do with Dumbledore being wrong?"

"Don't you see? Dumbledore was the one who had to decide what each champion would miss the most. He was wrong about me." said Harry with a triumphant look on his face.

Ginny shook her head, "I still don't get it. How was he wrong?"

Now, Harry paused and smiled down at Ginny, "It's quite simple really. He put the wrong Weasley at the bottom of the lake."

Ginny blushed when she realized what Harry meant by this statement. Harry merely continued to smile at her. Then he said, "Now, I think that we had better wake the others. I don't think they will be happy if we leave them down here to sleep all night."

Harry and Ginny woke the other three and Harry assured them that he was just fine and they all needed to get some sleep because they got to go home for the holidays the next morning.

Grudgingly the three Gryffindors trudged up the stair to their beds. Harry held back for just a moment, and kissed Ginny lightly, "Good night, Miss Weasley."

Ginny smiled, and returned, "Sleep well, Mr. Potter."

Then, the two followed the others up the stairs.

15. Christmas at Grimmauld Place

The next morning, Harry was up at dawn to finish packing his trunk for the trip back to London. By the time all of the others were up and had finished packing, Harry had already been downstairs to eat his breakfast. “Come on, guys.” urged Harry. “We’re out for two whole weeks.” The others made noncommittal sounds in the backs of their throats and marched down to the Great Hall to eat. The group rode the carriages to the platform in Hogsmeade around mid-morning and got on the train.

The train ride was relatively uneventful. The five Gryffindors and Luna had a compartment to themselves. The conversation remained light, and was punctuated by each of the prefects leaving to do their rounds of the train. Finally the train pulled in at Platform 9 ¾. The students took turns leaving the platform and heading out into King’s Cross. Mrs. Weasley was there with Lupin, Sturgis, and Mad-Eye.

Mrs. Weasley immediately enveloped each of them in a hug. Harry received the largest. “Harry, how can I ever thank you enough? This makes three times that you have saved my daughter’s life.”

Harry patted her on the back, “It’s okay, Molly. If I have to save her three hundred more times, then I will never have repaid the kindness that your family has shown me.”

The group collected their trunks and headed out of the station. Lupin drove and soon enough the group settled in at Grimmauld Place. Sturgis and Mad-Eye left. Fred and George Weasley came strolling out of the kitchen.

Fred looked at Harry, and then looked to George. The two nodded and then drew their wands. Fred said, “Now, Harry, George and I would like to discuss the idea of you dating our baby sister with you.”

George nodded, “Yeah, mate, as much as we like you, we have to hex you for dating our sister.”

Harry pulled his own wand, “I wouldn’t try it if I were you. If the two of you so much as attempt to cast a spell, then I will insure that the two of you spend the rest of your lives walking around with large pink bunny ears.”

Fred smiled, “Now, now, Harry. You know that you’re not allowed to use magic outside of school, yet.”

George nodded, “So, we will have no more idle threats.” The two advanced on Harry.

Harry merely yelled, “Expelliarmus. Expelliarmus.” Both of the twins were knocked backward and dropped their wands. Harry continued, “Accio wands.” The twins wands zoomed into Harry’s hand.

The room looked on in shock. Lupin was the first to find his voice, “Harry, you can’t cast magic like that. The Ministry will have you thrown out of Hogwarts for sure this time. You broke the Restriction for Underage Magic.”

Harry shook his head, “Relax, Remus. Did I forget to mention that that law doesn’t apply to me anymore? I used magic around here all summer, and I never got a notice from the Ministry.”

Ron managed to ask, “Why doesn’t that law apply to you anymore?”

Harry answered, “Simple. I learned how to disguise my magical signature. They can’t tell when I’m casting a spell anymore. So, they can’t exactly enforce a law if they can’t prove that I broke it.”

Hermione sniffed, “Harry, that is no excuse. You still shouldn’t be breaking the law. It doesn’t matter if you can get away with it or not. It’s still wrong.”

Harry blew out a long breath, “Hermione, for once in your life, lighten up. I don’t typically break the restriction for trivial reasons. The only reason that I did this just now was to prove a point to those two.” He pointed at the twins, who were still lying on the floor, dumbfounded. “Most of the time, I only break the restriction so that I can practice combat magic to face Voldemort.”

The Weasleys all winced at the sound of the name. Hermione continued to protest, “Harry, it doesn’t matter. You are still breaking the law.”

“One day, Hermione, the rules are going to fail you. There will be no answers within them. One day your books are going to fail you. You will not be able to find the solution to the problem in a text. On that day, Hermione, I want to know what you will do?” Harry said.

Hermione looked bewildered, “I don’t know.”

Harry stared at her grimly, “If you don’t know, then you will die.” Harry tossed the twin’s wands back to them. “While we have everyone together, I guess it is time to let the rest of you in on my little secret.”

Molly looked at him, “What are you talking about?”

Harry responded, “I am an unregistered Animagus.”

The twins snorted, “Good one, mate. What are you going to tell us next? Are you going to claim to be the first person to ever have more than one form?”

Harry looked at the twins evenly, and replied, “I might.” Then, he transformed into a panther and leaped at them. The twins jumped out of his way. Harry landed and then transformed back. “Just in case the two of you get any ideas. I’m dangerous even without a wand.” Harry smiled cheekily at the twins.

The twins gulped and Fred said, “We’ve changed our minds. I don’t think that we need to hex you for dating out sister.”

George chimed in, “Yeah, mate, she made a good choice.”

Harry struggled not to laugh at the two. “Why thank you.” he told them.

Remus finally asked, “Harry, how long have you been an Animagus?”

Harry shrugged, “I worked it out the first week that I was here this summer.”

“When did you begin training to become an Animagus?” asked Lupin again.

Harry replied easily, “The same day that I figured out how to do it.”

Molly burst out, “Are you trying to say that you completed Animagus training in one day?”

Lupin breathed, “Impossible.”

Harry snorted, “There’s that word, again. I hate the word impossible. Especially when people are using it to refer to me. I’m not trying to say that I did it one day. I am saying that I did it in one day.”

“How many people know that you are an Animagus?” asked Lupin.

“Ten.”

“Who?” asked Molly.

Harry responded, “Well, there are seven of you standing here. Add Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore to the list and you’ve got them all.”

“Snape knows?” asked Ron.

Harry nodded, “He found out last night after I got out of the forest.”

Molly asked quickly, “What do you mean, after you got out of the forest?”

Harry shrugged, “I had to go into the forest to check and see if there were any Dementors hanging around.”

Molly demanded, “Why you?”

Harry looked at her, “Do you know anyone else at the school that can move as swiftly through the forest as a panther?”

“Well, no.” answered Molly.

“Then, it was obvious that I needed to be the one to go.”

“I just think that the adults should have taken the responsibility on themselves instead of placing it on a child.” bit out Molly.

Harry shook his head, “Molly, I believe we have had this conversation before. I am not a child. It’s time that you accept that I am going to be in danger. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

Molly cried, “I know, but I still don’t like it.”

Harry snorted, “Do you think I do?”

She shook her head, “No.”

Harry smiled, and rested a hand on her shoulder, “Then, stop worrying about it. I think that it is time for us to see about some dinner. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am starving.”

The next couple of days passed quickly with things happening around the house. Before any of them knew it, Christmas Day had dawned. The entire house awoke to a scream. “HARRY JAMES POTTER, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?”

Ron looked over at Harry groggily, “I think that Ginny found your Christmas present.”

Harry nodded, “I would say so.”

Ginny burst in through the boy’s door. She held two boxes with the words “To Ginny, From Harry” scrawled across the label. “What are these?”

Harry shrugged, “They look like Christmas presents to me.”

By this time, the rest of the house was assembled outside the door watching the exchange. Ginny snapped, “Don’t you get smart with me, Mr. Potter. The dress robes were supposed to be my Christmas present. You weren’t supposed to get me anything else.”

Harry asked, “Who said that?”

“You did.” Ginny snapped again.

Harry shook his head, “I remember saying that the dress robes were a Christmas present. I don’t remember saying for which Christmas.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed, “What is that supposed to mean?”

Harry looked over at Ron in mock thought, “Did I get Ginny a Christmas present in 1989?”

Ron shook his head, “No, mate, you didn’t.”

Harry nodded, “There you go, then. The dress robes were your Christmas present from me for 1989. The boxes in your hand are for this year.”

Ginny looked as if she were going to go off again, when Molly laid a hand on Ginny’s shoulder. “You know, Ginny, you’re not being very gracious. When you receive a gift that someone wants to give you, its usually polite to say thank you. Most people don’t yell at someone for giving them a gift.”

Ginny looked around at her mother, tears beginning to form in her eyes, “But, Mum, I can’t give him presents like this. It’s not fair.”

Harry stood up and hugged Ginny. “Ginny, do you think I care about that? I will love anything that you give me. I already have the best present in the world everyday that I get to wake up and look into your beautiful face.”

Ginny smiled and leaned back into Harry’s chest. Molly smiled happily down at the two. “Well, everyone bring your presents downstairs and you can open them together.

They all followed her downstairs. All of the kids began opening presents quickly. Ginny had given Harry an Eagle Feather quill and parchment embossed with the Gryffindor seal. Harry looked up at her, “Ginny, this is wonderful.” He leaned over and kissed her. “Thank you.” She smiled and looked down at her feet.

Ginny waited until everyone had finished opening their gifts before she set the two boxes from Harry in front of her. Hermione leaned over and said anxiously, “Hurry up. The rest of us are dying to see what they are.”

Ginny looked up, “You mean you don’t already know?”

All of the other shook their heads. Harry smiled, “What is in those boxes, I picked out all by myself. I didn’t have a bit of help.”

Ginny began to rip the wrapping paper from the first of the boxes. She removed the lid of the box and gasped. Sitting inside the box was a golden bracelet adorned with rubies. Inside each ruby was a picture of the Gryffindor lion. “Oh my God, Harry. It’s beautiful.”

Hermione almost jumped up in anticipation, “Well, let us see.”

Ginny pulled the bracelet out of the box. Molly and Hermione squealed as they examined it. Ron’s mouth fell open. The twins goggled at the bracelet and then at Harry. Arthur just nodded approvingly at Harry. Remus leaned over to him, “Harry, did you really pick that out yourself?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, I did.”

“I’m impressed. Your dad had to have a load of help to pick out jewelry for your mother.” stated Lupin.

Harry grinned smugly, “If you’re impressed, now. Wait until she opens the other one.”

Remus raised his eyebrows in surprise and turned back to await the contents of the second box.

Ginny managed to put the bracelet on. Then, she picked up the second box. She tore the wrapping paper from it quickly. Then, she lifted the lid from it. Lying inside the box was a beautiful golden necklace with a diamond pendant hanging from it. The pendant was set on either side with gold plating in which Ginny’s and Harry’s names were etched. Inside the pendant glistened the symbol for forever in Gryffindor red. Ginny began to cry. She couldn’t even lift the necklace out of the box. She merely handed it to Hermione. Then, she threw herself into Harry’s waiting arms.

Hermione gasped when she looked into the box. Then, she wordlessly held up the necklace for the others to admire. None of them could speak. They just stared at the necklace dumbstruck, and then turned and stared at Harry and Ginny.

Ginny finally managed to gasp out through her tears, “I love you, Harry Potter.”

Harry smiled, and answered, “I love you, too, Virginia Weasley.”

Lupin met Molly’s eyes and mouthed, “I told you so.”

Molly smiled through her own tears, and held her husband’s hand. The nine people in the room sat that way for a short while. Arthur finally leaned forward, and asked, “Well, Harry, are the two of you going to sit there all day, or are you going to put that lovely necklace around my daughter’s neck. Harry stood up and took the necklace from where Hermione still sat holding it. He placed it around Ginny’s neck and did the clasp. Ginny broke down and began to cry again. The other two females joined her.

It was later that day that Harry was going through things in Sirius’ room. Ginny walked in, “What are you doing, Harry?”

“Looking for your other Christmas present.” replied Harry without looking up.

“Harry, you’ve already given me too much.” protested Ginny.

Harry laughed, "This isn't exactly along the same lines. Aha! I found it." Harry pulled a mirror out of the trunk. He handed it to Ginny.

She looked at him like he was crazy. "It's a mirror."

Harry nodded, "It's a two way mirror. I have the other one. If you ever want to talk to me, all you have to do is say my name into it. My mirror will vibrate, and I will know that you are trying to contact me. My father and Sirius used to use them when they were stuck in separate detentions."

She clutched the mirror to her chest, "Harry, I love it."

He grinned, "I thought you might. Now, onto your last Christmas present."

"Another one?" asked Ginny in amazement.

Harry stuck his head out the door to make sure that no one was around. He shut the door and cast a Silencing Charm on it. Ginny raised her eyes at him, and asked, "What exactly do you have in mind, Mr. Potter?"

Harry chuckled, "Nothing like that. I just don't want anyone to hear what I'm about to tell you."

"What are you about to tell me?" questioned Ginny.

Harry scratched his head, "Well, did you happen to catch the comment that one of the twins made earlier."

"Harry, they made a lot of comments earlier. Which one?"

"The one right before I showed them my Animagus form."

Ginny shook her head, "I wasn't really paying that close of attention. I was still in shock about the fact that you can use magic outside school."

"Well, they asked me if I was going to claim to have more than one form."

Ginny's eyes widened, "You're not about to tell me that you really do have more than one form, are you?"

Harry nodded, "Guilty."

Ginny sat down on the bed, "What other form do you have?"

"Forms, Ginny. Forms." Harry corrected.

Ginny fell off the bed, "What do you mean forms?"

Harry grinned, "I have two more besides the panther."

"What are they?" breathed Ginny.

"Well, you know that phoenix that you have been spending a lot of time with?" asked Harry.

Ginny looked up at him, "You can't."

Harry nodded, and then transformed into the beautiful golden phoenix. Ginny reached out and petted the bird behind the head. Harry sat and enjoyed it for awhile and then changed back. "So, do you like?"

Ginny smiled, "I like very much. What about the other one?"

Harry replied, "My other form is kind of small. It's a chameleon." Then, he transformed into the small creature. Ginny picked him up in her hand. She looked into his eyes and smiled. She set him back down. He changed back.

"I prefer you to look like this, Mr. Potter." She leaned forward and kissed him. While she was kissing him, the enormity of what she had just seen caught up with her. She pulled away, "Harry, no one has ever been able to take more than one Animagus form."

"I know." he replied.

"You're also a magical creature. I don't think anyone has done that either."

Harry shook his head, "No, that has been accomplished. Godric Gryffindor had a griffin as his Animagus form."

Ginny put her face in her hands, "I need to go lie down."

Harry smiled, and removed the Silencing Charm from the door. They walked down the hall, and passed Hermione, who said, "Hey, Ginny. Hi, Harry."

Ginny just walked by in a daze and went into her room. Hermione looked at Harry, "What's wrong with her?"

Harry shook his head, "Nothing is really wrong with her. She just had a few surprises."

Hermione asked, "What kind of surprises?"

Harry shrugged, "You'll just have to wonder." Then, he walked away.

It was a couple of days later that Dumbledore came by. He looked at Harry and said, "Harry it is time for us to talk."

"About what, sir?" asked Harry.

"We need to discuss your inheritance, Harry."

"I thought that you had already told me what I got from the Black Estate."

"I did. However, we have not discussed your inheritance from the Potter estate."

"I thought that was what was in my vault at Gringotts." said Harry confusedly.

"The money, yes. However, have you never thought about the home?"

"I thought that was destroyed when Voldemort attacked."

Dumbledore shook his head, "No. That was the safe house that they were using. The actual Potter estate is just outside the village where the safe house was."

Harry breathed lightly, "Godric's Hollow."

"Yes, Harry. Tomorrow we will be going there." Dumbledore got up and Disapparated away, leaving Harry lost in his own thoughts.

16. Godric’s Hollow

It was later that same night that Harry fell asleep and inadvertently slipped into Voldemort’s mind. Voldemort appeared to be in a fume. He was striding back and forth, furiously. “I want the spy dead before the week is out. Severus Snape will betray me no longer.”

Lucius Malfoy nodded, “Yes, Master, I will see to it personally.” Lucius seemed to hesitate, but finally decided to ask, “Master, what about the target?”

Voldemort stopped, “We will take her the next time that the students are allowed to go to the village. She will be vulnerable at such time.”

Lucius persisted, “Master, Potter will not let her go easily.”

Voldemort’s face darkened, “Do not mention that boy’s name in my presence, Lucius.”

Lucius bowed, “Yes, Master, I beg forgiveness, but the fact remains that he will be a problem.”

“I am aware of that, Lucius. It will be a problem that you must surmount. Your concern over the matter has just earned you the position of leader.”

Lucius gulped, “Yes, Master.”

Harry jerked awake. They knew that Snape was the spy. He had to warn Dumbledore. He quickly ran downstairs, and grabbed Floo Powder from above the fireplace. He shouted, “Albus Dumbledore.” as he threw the powder into the fire.

Dumbledore’s head appeared in the fire a moment later. “What is it, Harry?”

“Is Severus with the Death Eaters?” asked Harry quickly.

Dumbledore seemed startled at the question, “Yes, he’s out on a mission right now.”

“Do you have a way to contact him, quickly?” continued Harry.

Dumbledore nodded, “Yes, we use mirrors much like the one Sirius gave you.”

“You have to call him, now. The game is up. Voldemort knows that he is the spy. He just gave the order to have him killed.” Harry spoke this in a rapid voice.

“I will contact him immediately. Thank you for this information, Harry.” Dumbledore disappeared from the fire. Harry heard a noise from behind him. He spun and drew his wand. Ginny stopped in the doorway to the kitchen.

Harry smiled, “Come on in, Gin. I don’t suppose I’m going to get much sleep tonight. If you want, you can keep me company.”

Ginny returned his smile sleepily, “I always want to keep you company, Harry. So, what’s wrong?”

Harry looked grim, “I just got a vision within Voldemort’s mind. He found out that Snape is the spy for our side. I just contacted Dumbledore to let him know. I just hope Dumbledore can get him out of there before Lucius gets to him.”

Ginny looked at Harry in admiration, “You’re really worried about Snape, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded, “Of course. I may not much like him personally, but the fact remains that he is on our side. If there is something that I can do to save him, I have to do it.”

Ginny leaned her head against Harry’s shoulder, “I love you, Harry Potter.”

“I know, Gin. I know.”

At that moment, Mrs. Weasley barged into the kitchen, “And just what do the two of you think that you are doing up at this hour. Get right back to bed the both of you. If I catch you up at this hour again, I’ll..”

She paused as Harry banged a fist down onto the table. A fire blazed up behind his eyes. “Shut up, Molly. Do I have to remind you that you are a guest in my home. This is not the Burrow, and you are not in charge. I have had enough of your tantrums.”

Ginny looked at Harry in amazement. Molly spluttered as Arthur walked into the room. Arthur looked at Harry, “Now, Harry, there was no need to talk to Molly that harshly.”

“Yes, Arthur, there was. I’m sorry that it is necessary, but I had to get her attention. Molly, you have a bad tendency to fly off the handle with everyone around you. They keep calling it the famous Weasley temper. Your children are afraid of it. I am not. Molly, I respect you and Arthur as much or more than I do any other witch or wizard alive. However, you have got to stop jumping to conclusions. If Ginny and I are up at an ungodly hour, then there is bound to be a reason. Instead of asking us why we are up in a calm manner, you flew off the handle. I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you, but you owe Ginny and I an apology for your actions.”

Arthur smiled at Harry, and then looked pointedly at his wife. She broke down, “I’m sorry I’m so short tempered all the time. But with Bill, Charlie, Arthur, and you in the Order, Percy still has not started talking to us, Fred and George are probably going to join the Order now that they have their business under control, I’m just so worried.”

Harry’s expression softened, “I understand, Molly, but I told you once before, Stop worrying. It doesn’t accomplish anything.”

She shook her head, “I can’t stop. I’m afraid that something is going to happen to one of you.”

Harry placed a hand on her shoulder, and said gently, “Molly, do you think that I am going to let Voldemort get to any of the people I care about?” The three Weasleys winced at the sound of his name. “I can’t promise you that none of them will get hurt, but I can promise you that if I’m around, he will have to go through me to get to them. That is one fight that Tom will not enjoy.”

All three Weasleys that were in the room looked askance at the steel in Harry’s voice. Even more disconcerting was the look in his eyes. It was the look of someone that sees death at the end of their path, and has accepted it. Ginny asked timidly. “Harry, are you going to die?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, Ginny, I am going to die. It is only a matter of when.”

“I meant are you going to die fighting You-Know-Who?” repeated Ginny.

“Use his name, Ginny.” said Harry.

“What?”

“I said, use Voldemort’s name. I’m tired of all this You-Know-Who business. If you can’t speak his name, then you will never truly have the courage to defy him. If you want an answer to the question you just asked, Use his name.” explained Harry.

Ginny gulped, “Are you going to die fighting V.. V.. V.. Voldemort?” Ginny panted as is she had just finished running laps. Her parents winced at the name, but beamed at their daughter’s courage nonetheless.

Harry nodded, “Yes, Ginny, I am going to die fighting Voldemort.”

Arthur looked at Harry, “Harry, if you die fighting You-Know-Who, what hope do the rest of us have?”

Harry replied easily, “Plenty, as long as I take the bastard with me.”

Arthur nodded somberly, while Molly continued to cry. Ginny sniffed, and sat down at the table. Harry appeared to be unconcerned about the fact that he had just predicted his own death. There was a pop and suddenly the kitchen contained two more occupants. Dumbledore and Snape had Apparated into the room.

Harry looked at them, “I see that you got to him before Lucius did.”

Snape replied coldly, “I could have handled Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry snorted, “Not if he had brought a roomful of cronies with him. You should know by now that Lucius is too much of a coward to face even odds.”

A ghost of a smile touched Snape’s lips, “I suppose you’re right.”

Dumbledore’s lips twitched as he fought a smile. “Severus has news to report.” He motioned for Severus to report.

Molly stood up, “Ginny, go on up to bed.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, Molly, this concerns her as well. Severus, continue.”

Snape nodded his head, “Voldemort is making plans to capture your daughter.”

Harry snorted, “That was blunt.”

Arthur and Molly paled, but Ginny just nodded and gulped visibly. Harry took her hand and squeezed it. “Don’t worry, he’s going to have to bring an army to get you away from me.” Harry reassured her.

Snape spared a glance at Dumbledore, who nodded. “We believe that is exactly what he intends to do.”

Arthur finally found his voice, “Do you know when he plans on trying to take her?”

Snape shook his head, “My mission was cut short. I was unable to discover this information.”

Harry spoke up, “Don’t worry. I know when they are going to make an attempt at taking her. What confuses me is why?”

Snape responded coldly, “I would think that was obvious, Potter. She is your girlfriend. The Dark Lord seeks to gain an advantage over you.”

Harry shook his head, “Doesn’t compute. Voldemort may be overconfident and egotistical, but he’s not stupid. He knows that I will have a way of discovering Ginny’s whereabouts. So, unless he wants to give away his current location, taking Ginny wouldn’t be worth the risk. Since, right now, he doesn’t want to face me, it doesn’t make sense. He knows that if he takes her, I’m going to come busting in there with a load of Order members and Aurors. That isn’t a battle that he wants right now. It would make more sense for them to try to kill her, not abduct her.”

Molly looked terrified by the thought, “Why would it make more sense for them to kill her.”

Harry replied, “Because then I would be mad with grief and might do something stupid, giving him an advantage. That won’t work if she’s still alive. He must have another reason besides the fact that she is my girlfriend. Something that justifies the risk. I just don’t know what it is.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Your reasoning is sound, Harry. When is the attack to come?”

“Next Hogsmeade weekend.” answered Harry without looking at Dumbledore.

Molly said immediately, “Ginny will not be going to Hogsmeade again this year.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “I’m afraid that it is not that simple. Voldemort will attack anyway. We will have to cancel all Hogsmeade visits for the rest of the year. None of the students would be safe.”

Harry interrupted, “We can’t do it. It will raise all sorts of suspicion. We can’t let Voldemort know that we suspect the attack.” Harry looked to the three Weasleys, “I have a plan. We won’t do it if the three of you feel that it is too much of a risk. At least hear me out, though.”

Arthur, Molly, and Ginny nodded. Harry continued, “We need to keep the Hogsmeade visit on, as planned. However, we post a number of Order members and Aurors that we know we can trust in the village that day. I will stick to Ginny like glue, and we will wait for the attack. They won’t send a terribly large number of Death Eaters, because they won’t be expecting me to have back-up.”

Molly burst out, “You expect us to knowingly send our baby girl into danger.”

Ginny replied defiantly, “I am not a baby. I fought Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries last summer.”

Molly shook her head, “That should never have occurred. I forbid you to put yourself into danger, again.”

Harry leaned forward, “Molly, I know that you don’t like this, but its better to bait the trap we know about than to step in the one we don’t.”

Arthur nodded, “A wise notion, Harry, but how does that help us decide to send our daughter into a situation where her life will be in danger.”

Harry sighed, “Her life is already in danger. Just by associating yourself with me, you become a target. I’m trying to give the Death Eaters second thoughts about trying to take her.”

Molly looked at Harry with tears forming in her eyes, “Can you promise that you won’t let Ginny get hurt?”

Harry shook his head, “Molly, you know that is a promise that I can’t make. However, I think this is our best chance at keeping her and a lot of other people safe in the long run. I can promise you that I will be dead or unconscious before they will take her.”

Molly sobbed, “I don’t want anything to happen to you either, Harry.” She cried for a moment longer, and then wiped her eyes, “The decision is Ginny’s. Its up to her.”

Ginny looked at her mother in amazement, but she answered in a firm voice, “I trust Harry with my life. I say we go for it.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore, “Well, what do you say, Professor.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “I don’t like it.”

“No one’s asking you to like it, sir. I’m asking you to accept it.” replied Harry evenly.

Dumbledore nodded wearily, “I have little choice in the matter. We don’t really have any other options.”

Harry looked at his watch and noticed that it was after four o’clock in the morning. “Professor, what time were you planning on us going to Godric’s Hollow?”

Dumbledore smiled, “I had planned on going early, but I need some rest just as much as you do, Harry. I will come for you around one o’clock.” Dumbledore and Snape Disapparated away.

Harry looked to the Weasleys, “Can Ginny come with me to see my parents house this afternoon?” He turned to Ginny, “That is, if you want to?”

Ginny smiled, “Of course, I want to. Mum, Dad, can I go?”

Arthur smiled, “Yes, Ginny, you can go.”

Ginny bounced excitedly for a moment, and then yawned tiredly. Harry smiled at her, “Come on, sleeping beauty. I’ll walk you to your room. Then, I’m going to grab some sleep myself. It has been a long night.”

Harry kissed Ginny goodnight at her door and then trudged into the room that he shared with Ron. He dropped onto his bed and was asleep within moments.

Harry didn’t wake up until almost noon. When he finally came downstairs, Ron looked at him sullenly, “I heard you had a bit of excitement last night.”

Harry replied dryly, “You could say that.”

Ron asked, “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Harry ran his hand through his hair, “Why would I have woke you up? There was no need.”

Ron stomped off out of the room muttering, “That’s just great. The wonderful Harry Potter doesn’t need help from anyone.”

Ginny walked into the room as Ron stormed out. She asked, “What was his problem?”

Harry shrugged, “He’s upset because I didn’t wake him up last night.”

Hermione walked in to hear this statement, “He has a right to be upset. I feel the same way. You need to let us know what is going on.”

Harry shook his head, “No, I don’t. I’ve told the both of you several times already. You are not ready for what I have to say. When you are, I will let you know. Until then, you just have to be patient.”

Hermione sniffed, and turned and followed Ron’s path from the room. Harry plopped down onto the couch with a groan, “What am I going to do with those two?”

Ginny sat down beside him, “You could just tell them everything.”

Harry shook his head, “I wish I could. I have been serious about what I have been telling them. Neither of them are ready.”

Ginny asked hesitantly, “Am I ready?”

Harry groaned again, “I was afraid that you were going to ask me that question. The answer is yes and no. You are better prepared to handle what I have to say than they are, but I’m still hesitant to let you in on everything at once. I’m afraid that I will give you sensory overload. That’s why I have been giving it to you in pieces. Heck, Gin, you know a lot of things that members of the Order don’t even know.”

“So, are you going to tell me everything?” Ginny asked.

“There’s only one thing left that you don’t know. I guess it is time that you knew.” answered Harry.

“What is it that I don’t know?”

“The contents of the Prophecy. Its time that you knew what has been plaguing me since that night at the Department of Mysteries.” returned Harry.

Ginny switched lines of questioning, “Why am I ready, and Ron and Hermione aren’t?”

“Different reasons actually. I know Ron is your brother, and he’s my best friend, but he can be a bit thick sometimes. He also tends to jump to conclusions, the wrong conclusions. Once he grows out of that he will be ready. Hermione, on the other hand, has read entirely too many books. It is the basis for her entire being. She has some fantasy built up in her head that she is going to find a spell in some dusty old book that no one has read in over a thousand years. She thinks that the spell will allow her to just wave her wand and save the world. She just doesn’t understand the intensity of combat. She tries to analyze things too much. Its fine when she’s dueling with other students that don’t have half her abilities, but when it came to a real fight in the Department of Mysteries, she was one of the first ones down. That’s why the two of them are not ready. Once they overcome those particular weaknesses, then they will be ready for the fight. Until then it is best that they know as little as possible.” explained Harry.

Ginny got up, “Well, that’s enough of that conversation for now. You need to eat something before Professor Dumbledore arrives to take us to Godric’s Hollow.”

Harry nodded and allowed Ginny to pull him up off the couch and drag him into the kitchen.

About an hour later, Dumbledore Apparated into the kitchen. Harry and Ginny sat at the table waiting for them. He looked down at them, “Are you ready to go?”

Harry and Ginny nodded and Harry said, “Yes, we’re ready.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Grab a pinch of Floo Powder and call out Potter Manor.”

Harry took a pinch and called out, “Potter Manor.” He stepped into the flames and disappeared. Ginny quickly followed suit, and Dumbledore Apparated right into the sitting room. He looked around in awe, “It’s beautiful, Professor.”

Dumbledore smiled, “Yes, I must admit that Lily had excellent taste. James allowed her to redecorate shortly after they moved in.”

Harry motioned, “Do you think that I could look around?”

“That’s why we’re here, Harry. You were born in this house.” replied Dumbledore.

Harry looked amazed, “I was? Did I have a room?”

Dumbledore nodded, “Upstairs. The second door on the right was your nursery.”

Harry leaped forward and ran pell-mell up the stairs. Ginny followed more slowly. She found Harry standing in a room with broomstick and Snitch wallpaper. There were toys all about. An antique crib stood in the center of the room. Harry was gazing around with tears forming in his eyes.

Ginny stepped up to him and wrapped an arm around his waist. He responded by wrapping one of his arms around her shoulders. She looked up at him, and smiled, “This will make an excellent nursery for our child.”

Harry looked down at Ginny and raised his eyebrows. Ginny blushed and mumbled, “Someday.”

Harry chuckled lightly, “Yes, Miss Weasley, it shall.”

The two began walking through the different rooms. There was a portrait room with paintings of various members of his family. There were even portraits of his mother and father. They were all asleep at the moment, so Harry decided to leave them that way. Talking to his parents portrait was not something that he was ready for, yet.

Ginny looked around and finally asked, “Harry, if no one has lived here in years, why is everything so clean?”

Harry shrugged, “I don’t know. Maybe Professor Dumbledore sent some of the Hogwart’s elves to clean up for our visit.”

Ginny nodded, “Maybe. I guess we will have to ask him.” They found Professor Dumbledore sitting in the den watching a Muggle television. Ginny looked at it in bewilderment, “Isn’t that a Muggle appliance or something?”

Harry and Dumbledore nodded. Harry replied, “It’s called a television. They use it primarily for entertainment. My only question is, what is it doing in a wizard’s house? I didn’t know that we had electricity.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “You don’t. Your mother and father were both excellent Charms and Transfiguration students. They figured out a way to make most Muggle appliances run on magic. Lily liked certain Muggle things. James thought they were amusing.”

Harry nodded, and then asked, “Professor, why is the house so clean? After having been abandoned for all these years, you would expect there to be dust and stuff at the very least.”

“The house hasn’t been abandoned for long, Harry. The house elf has been keeping it clean. Sadly, she died last year. Dobby came in and touched up a bit before our visit. The house was so immaculate however that there was little for him to do even then.” responded Dumbledore.

Harry smiled, “I suppose Dobby jumped at the chance to come to my home.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Yes, he was quite excited. So, are you ready?”

“Ready for what, Professor?” asked Harry curiously.

“To visit the cemetery where your parents are buried.”

Harry’s eyes widened, “Is it close by?”

Dumbledore nodded, “They are buried in Godric’s Hollow cemetery which is just through the woods.”

Harry gripped Ginny’s hand tightly and said very softly, “Yes, I want to go. I’m ready.”

Ginny felt tears spring to her own eyes when she saw Harry in such obvious pain, but she bit her lip and followed him and Dumbledore from the house.

Dumbledore looked over at the young couple, and said gently, “Wands out. Just in case. We’re perfectly safe in the house, but it would be only too easy for Death Eaters to stage an attack outside.”

Harry and Ginny nodded. Ginny reached into her robes for her wand, and then noticed that Harry already had his clenched in his hand. She thought to herself, How did he draw his wand so quickly? Then, she shook her head and let the question slip away from her mind. The three made their way through the woods, and came out into a graveyard. There was one other person there. He was wearing robes, so it was obvious he was a wizard. He looked up as the three entered the graveyard to his right. He smiled warmly, “Albus, how are you doing, old chap?” He extended a hand which Dumbledore shook. He looked over at Harry and Ginny, and asked, “So, who is this that you have brought with you?” He paused as he looked at Harry. Then, his face lightened in surprise, “Harry, I haven’t seen you since your farce of a trial before the Wizengamot.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Dumbledore and then shook the wizard’s proffered hand. Dumbledore laughed, “Harry, Ginny, this is Davis Weatherby. He is a member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He is also the youngest member of the Wizengamot.”

Harry gave the man a stony look at which the man laughed, “Hey, don’t look at me like that. I voted for your acquittal. In fact, I thought the whole thing was ridiculous to begin with.”

Harry smiled at the man warmly after this statement, “Thank you, Mr. Weatherby.”

The man shook his head, “Call me Davis. I don’t stand much on ceremony or titles.” He turned to look at Ginny. “With that flaming red hair and those freckles, you must be Arthur’s little girl.” Ginny flushed and nodded. “I haven’t seen you since you were about three feet tall. I must say that you have turned out to be a lovely young lady.” Ginny continued to blush and the man spoke again, “So, are you keeping our young Mr. Potter in line?”

Ginny looked up at the man, “What are you talking about?”

Davis glanced down at Harry and Ginny’s entwined fingers and grinned, “Well, Lily always had to keep James in line. I assumed that Harry’s girlfriend would have to do the same to him.”

Harry and Ginny blushed at Davis’ comment. The man continued relentlessly, “Although, I must say that it is about time that a Potter finally took up with a Weasley. I’m surprised that it hasn’t happened sooner.”

Harry and Ginny both looked confused, “What is that supposed to mean?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore and Davis both smiled, “Well, Harry, the last five generations of men in your family have all fallen for and married red headed women.”

Harry glanced over at Ginny, whose face was redder than her hair, and grinned, “So, you’re saying that I was doomed to fall for Ginny’s charms no matter what I did.”

Ginny slapped Harry’s arm in protest, “What do you mean doomed?”

“Sorry, I was just teasing, Ginny.”

She smiled, “I know.”

The two adults laughed heartily at the young couple. Harry turned to Davis, “Davis, did you know my parents well?”

Davis nodded his head, “As well as neighbors can know each other. My family estate is close to Potter Manor. James and I played as children. I was two years ahead of your parents in school, but James and I played a lot of Quidditch during the summers.”

Harry asked, “Were you in Gryffindor?”

Davis shook his head, “No, I was in Ravenclaw. Your father and I were rival seekers for awhile until I finished school.”

“Where did you play Quidditch at during the summer?”

Davis smiled, “The field behind Potter Manor is enchanted so that when people are riding broomsticks over it, it appears to Muggles as if they are doing yard work.”

Harry grinned appreciatively, “You’re kidding.”

Davis shook his head, “Nope, the Potters have been Quidditch players for several generations. Your great- great uncle played for England.”

Harry smiled, “That would be cool.”

Davis nodded, “Well, I must be off. I have some appointments to attend to. I welcome you back to Godric’s Hollow, Harry. Have a nice day.” He tipped an imaginary hat to Ginny, and then nodded to Dumbledore. With a pop, he was gone.

Harry looked to Ginny and then to Dumbledore. He walked over to his parent’s graves, and sat down beside them. He touched their names etched into the granite tombstones. Then, he cried. Ginny sat down beside him, and waited for him to finish. Dumbledore stood quietly off to one side. After a bit of time had passed, Harry stood up and walked as if in a daze back to the manor. Dumbledore and Ginny followed. Once they were safely back inside the house, Harry turned to Dumbledore, “I think that it is time for Ginny to hear the Prophecy.”

Dumbledore nodded, “If that is what you think best, Harry. You will have to tell her. Your father’s Pensieve is in the cupboard. I must return to Hogwarts. There is Floo powder on the fireplace mantle. Whenever you are ready you may use it to return to Grimmauld Place.” After that he was gone.

Harry walked over to the cupboard and took out the Pensieve. He touched his wand to his head and drew out the memory of the Prophecy. He looked at Ginny. “This is what Voldemort sent his Death Eaters to get in the Department of Mysteries last summer. This is the information that Sirius died to protect. Guard it well.” Ginny nodded. Harry swirled the memory in the Pensieve until it took form and rose up.

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT ... AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

The memory receded back into the Pensieve.

Ginny looked stricken, “Does that mean what I think it means.”

Harry nodded, “I am the Child of the Prohecy.”

“So, that’s what you meant when you said that you were going to die fighting him.”

Harry nodded, “Use his name, Ginny.”

Ginny steeled herself, “So, you have to kill Voldemort or die at his hands, and you don’t think you can win.”

“Right now, I would die if I faced him. The Prophecy says that I have power that he doesn’t know, and its right. I can feel the power within me, but I can’t channel it. I can’t use it. Until I unlock the power, I can not defeat Voldemort.” explained Harry.

Ginny hugged Harry, “Then, you will unlock your power. Harry, I believe in you.”

Harry smiled down at her, “Thank you. All we can do is hope.”

Ginny shook her head, “I don’t have to hope. I know.”

Harry changed the subject, “As much as I love standing here with you, I think that we should get back to Grimmauld Place before your mum has a heart attack.”

Ginny laughed, “Yeah, I know. I thought she was going to go completely mental when she caught us up last night.”

Harry shook his head, “Your mum has a lot on her. She doesn’t know how to cope with all the people she loves being in constant danger. If we don’t end this war soon, she’s going to have a nervous breakdown. Enough of that. Let’s get back to Grimmauld Place.”

They each took a pinch of Floo Powder, and called out # 12 Grimmauld Place. They each disappeared into the fire and left Potter Manor deserted once again.

17. Back to Hogwarts

The rest of the holidays passed and it was soon time to return to school. Harry looked over at Ginny, “Are you ready for classes to start again?”

She grinned, “Not really, but I’m ready for Quidditch and the Dueling Club to begin, again.”

Harry looked at her and said playfully, “Suck up. You’re just trying to get brownie points with the teacher and captain.”

She nodded, “Is it working?”

He shook his head, “No, you already have the maximum amount of brownie points possible. It doesn’t do you any good to try and get more. I appreciate the sentiment, though.”

Molly came storming through, “Ron Weasley, will you hurry up? I don’t know why that boy can’t seem to pack the night before.” She bustled off still murmuring to herself.

Harry and Ginny exchanged glances and laughed. Finally, the four students were standing ready to head to King’s Cross. Lupin drove them to the station. They all went onto the platform without incident. Molly hugged them all good-bye and Lupin waved farewell. They got onto the train, and found a compartment. They were joined a few minutes later by Neville and Luna.

Harry grinned, “Hey, Neville, how was Christmas?”

Neville smiled enthusiastically, “Great. Luna came over to visit during the holidays. My Gran actually likes her.”

Harry tried not to laugh, “That’s a relief.”

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny snickered which was odd, considering that Ron and Hermione had been rather cool with Harry since he and Ginny had returned from Potter Manor. The six students continued to discuss their Christmas presents and the holidays. Neville’s eyes widened when he was shown the necklace and bracelet. Luna merely stared dreamily at them and said, “They are very nice.”

As it was inevitably expected, the six students finally heard the drawl of Malfoy’s voice outside the compartment. He opened the door, and said, “My, my, Potter, I see you have given the charity case some more attention.” His gaze was riveted on the necklace. Harry locked his eyes onto Malfoy and frowned. Something was different. Harry was getting the sense of presence that he only detected when he was looking at a Death Eater. Then it hit Harry. Malfoy had the Dark Mark. Harry aimed his wand while Malfoy continued to dish out insults, and Neville and Ron tossed them back at him. He cast a low level movement charm and inched Malfoy’s sleeve back. The Dark Mark was there. Harry could see it. He returned his attention to what Malfoy was saying. “I don’t think that the money you spend on the weasel’s little sister will much matter when the Dark Lord is through with you and all your Mudblood loving friends, Potter.” This statement was Malfoy’s last for the day. Harry whipped his wand up and around. He cast a Banishing Charm on Malfoy and his two cronies. They slammed back into the wall.

Harry advanced on them. “I have warned you entirely too many times, Malfoy. Your warnings are over. Send this message back to your father and your precious Dark Lord.” Harry sent a flurry of hexes at Malfoy that left him lying on the ground unconscious. Crabbe and Goyle looked at Harry nervously. Harry glared at them. “Take this piece of scum, and get him out of my sight.” The two quickly hastened to do as Harry said.

Harry walked back into the compartment and shut the door. Hermione was on him before he sat down. “Harry, are you crazy? You can’t assault a prefect like that. You’re going to get yourself expelled. As a prefect, I have to report what has happened to Professor McGonagall.”

Harry looked at her without concern, “You do that, Hermione.”

Hermione appeared as if she were about to say something else when Ron grabbed her arm. “Hermione, drop it for now. There’s nothing we can do about it. What’s done is done.”

She sat down in a huff, pulled out a book, and refused to speak to anyone else for the remainder of the train ride. The train pulled into Hogsmeade station shortly after dark. The students got out and got a thestral pulled carriage to themselves. Hermione was still refusing to speak. Ron seemed to be in a foul mood over it, so the carriage remained quiet.

After the carriage came to a stop in front of the castle, the students filed out and walked in through the double doors into the Entrance Hall. McGonagall was standing there waiting for them. “Mr. Potter, you must come with me.” Harry nodded, and began following her.

Once they were out of earshot, Hermione sniffed, “I told him that he was going to get in trouble.”

Ginny rounded on Hermione, and slapped her full across the face. “I have had it with the way you treat Harry. Both of you.” She looked at Ron, too. “Both of you have ignored him and then apologized. He’ll forgive you, and then you will do it again. I’m tired of it. The two of you need to get over yourselves. You’re not important enough to help Harry. Let him do things the way he wants to.”

Ron’s ears reddened, “The way you talk, Harry is the most important person on this planet.”

Ginny looked at him steadily, “If you weren’t so dumb, then you would probably know what I do, and not question that statement. Harry is the most important person in the world.”

Ron snorted, “He may be the most important person to you, Ginny, but the rest of the world doesn’t care that much.”

Ginny returned hotly, “Well, they should, because without Harry, Voldemort will kill or enslave everyone.” She spun around and stomped away.

Ron looked at Hermione and asked, “What was she on about? She acts like Harry is the only person that can beat You-Know-Who.”

Hermione looked to be deep in thought, “What if he is?”

Ron shrugged, “I think that it’s a load of crap.”

Hermione merely nodded and headed for the Great Hall. Ron followed behind her, while Neville went off with Luna looking troubled.

McGonagall and Harry arrived in front of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore’s office. “Honeydukes.” McGonagall said.

Harry strode into Dumbledore’s office confidently. Dumbledore appeared to be disappointed. “Harry, why did you attack Mr. Malfoy on the train? I know that his father is a Death Eater and that the two of you do not get along, but you can not attack students for no reason.”

“I had reason, Professor. Draco has taken the Dark Mark.” responded Harry easily.

Dumbledore and McGonagall gasped. McGonagall asked, “Are you sure, Potter?”

Harry nodded, “I sensed it, so I used a charm to pull up his sleeve while he was distracted to check. The burning was still fresh and easily visible. That means he has passed his initiation rites. It also means that he will probably be participating in the attack on Hogsmeade. We have a Death Eater in Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore looked grim, “This is bad. With the news that Severus gave us over the holidays, this is really bad.”

Harry nodded, “I’ve been waiting to ask you, sir. What else did Professor Snape find out before you pulled him out?”

Dumbledore looked up sharply, “How did you know that Severus discovered something else?”

Harry grinned, “It was just a suspicion. One that you just confirmed.”

“Professor Snape has discovered that Voldemort has a spy in the Minister’s office itself. This makes getting Auror help somewhat difficult.” answered Dumbledore.

“I see. We will just have to leave Fudge out of the loop. He’s an imbecile anyway.” stated Harry.

Dumbledore nodded, “We need to discuss the defenses we are going to employ in Hogsmeade.”

Harry shook his head, “You need to give me some sort of punishment first.”

Dumbledore asked, “How about detention for a week? Hagrid wants to do something in the forest. You could serve with him.”

Harry nodded, “That will work. It needs to seem to the governors that I am receiving some sort of punishment for attacking Malfoy. Now, let’s get down to business. I expect Voldemort to send anywhere from five to fifteen Death Eaters. They will have Dementors as backup. I figure fifteen to twenty of them. They might bring some dark creatures, but I doubt it.”

“So, we are going to need at least a dozen defenders.” stated Dumbledore.

Harry nodded again, “That sounds about right. Who do we have already?”

Dumbledore ticked off on his fingers, “Bill Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Sturgis Podmore, Alastor Moody, Remus Lupin, Fred Weasley, and George Weasley.”

“So, that’s eight including me. We need about four more Aurors. I don’t think that the Dementors will be that much of a problem. There are several members of the D.A. from last year that can cast Patroni. At least of few of them should be able to pull it off when confronted by a Dementor.” commented Harry.

McGonagall asked, “Who else should we approach?”

Harry replied, “I say that we approach some of the same ones that helped us at Platform 9 ¾. Amos Diggory, Dawlish, and that Adams bloke seem trustworthy enough. You can have Kingsley speak to them, since we have to keep things away from Fudge’s office.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, “That leaves us needing one more.”

Harry shook his head, “No, I would leave it there. We don’t really need to spread things any farther around. Too much chance of a leak. Unless a current member of the Order becomes available for duty, then I say that the eleven of us should be enough. I figure once they actually see Death Eaters, some of the villagers and older students will join in the fight anyway.”

Dumbledore sighed, “Very well, I will contact Kingsley and tell him to speak to the people we mentioned.”

Harry nodded, “If there is nothing else, I think I will get back downstairs before Ginny tears the castle apart waiting to see if I have been expelled.”

Harry ran back down to the Great Hall, and found Ron and Hermione eating together. “Where’s Ginny?”

Ron and Hermione shrugged, but didn’t speak to him. Harry sighed in exasperation and went off to look for her. He found her in the common room, sitting by herself. “What’s the matter, Gin?”

She looked at Harry with tears glistening in her eyes. “I got into a fight with Ron and Hermione over you.”

“What happened?” asked Harry, patiently.

Ginny leaned into him, “Hermione made a comment about telling you so. I slapped her and then yelled at both of them. I kind of let slip the fact that you were the only one who could beat Voldemort.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, “Let me guess. Ron scoffed, and Hermione went into deep thought mode.”

Ginny nodded, “I stormed away after that, but that seemed to be where they were at when I walked away.”

“Did you really slap Hermione?” asked Harry. Ginny nodded. Harry shook his head, “I guess those two aren’t going to be speaking to us for awhile.”

Ginny sniffed, “No, I suppose not. Its just as well. They need to get their priorities straight.”

Harry chuckled, “Come on, gorgeous. Let’s go down to the kitchen and get something to eat. I need to talk to Dobby anyway.”

Ginny got up and followed him, “Why do you need to talk to Dobby?”

Harry replied, “I have a proposition for him. Oh, and I have detention for the whole week for attacking Malfoy.”

Ginny raged, “Detention! Why did they give you detention? Malfoy was provoking you. You had every right to attack him.”

Harry grinned, “Calm down, Ginny. Its just to appease the governors. I’m actually going to help Hagrid with something. I don’t seem to spend enough time with him lately. That will serve as my detentions.”

Ginny deflated, “Oh. I guess that’s okay, then.”

The two of them stopped in front of the painting that led to the kitchens. Harry smiled, “Would you like to do the honors?”

Ginny smiled back, while she reached out to tickle the pear. The door opened and the two stepped in. Harry was immediately bowled over by Dobby. “Harry Potter, sir. Harry Potter is coming to see Dobby, sir. He has brought his Miss Wheazy with him.”

Ginny laughed at Harry while he was sprawled on the floor. Harry gave her a dirty look.

“Dobby, do you think that you could let me up?” asked Harry.

Dobby immediately jumped off of Harry and began to brush him off. “Dobby is sorry, sir.”

Harry smiled, “That’s okay. I came down here to thank you for cleaning up the house for me.”

Dobby beamed, “Dobby was glad to do it, sir. Dobby likes to look after Harry Potter.”

“I’m glad you said that, Dobby. I have to ask you something. I was wondering if there was anyway that I could convince you to leave Hogwarts?”

Dobby’s face fell, “Leave Hogwart’s, sir?”

Harry grinned down at the forlorn house-elf, “Yes, I was wondering if I could get you to come work for me at Potter Manor once I finish school.”

Dobby did a double-take, “Harry Potter wants Dobby to come work for him. Dobby would love to. Dobby would be honored to take care of Harry Potter and his Miss Wheazy.”

Harry nodded, “Good, I won’t be returning to Potter Manor until after next year. So, you will have to remain here at Hogwarts until then. After that I would be honored if you would come to Potter Manor with me.”

Dobby bounced up and down, “Dobby is going to be Harry Potter’s house elf. Dobby will be a good house-elf.”

Ginny smiled, “You already are, Dobby. You already are.”

Dobby beamed, “Miss Wheazy is too kind to Dobby.”

Ginny continued to smile, “Dobby, call me Ginny.”

Dobby nodded, “Ginny Wheazy is truly a great witch.”

Harry waved his hands, “Enough with hitting on my girlfriend, Dobby. Can we get something to eat? We don’t want to go up to the Great Hall.”

Dobby smiled, “Dobby is getting it right away.”

Ginny and Harry ate in the kitchens, and then headed back up to the common room. Both of them decided to go ahead and go to bed, rather than deal with the other Gryffindors.

18. D.A. on the Prowl

The next morning Harry awoke to find the other four boys still asleep. He dressed and went downstairs to wait for Ginny in the common room. Hermione came through and went out the portrait hole without even acknowledging Harry’s presence. Harry sighed. A short while later Ginny finally came down. Harry smiled at her. She smiled back. Harry got up and took her hand, and the two went out the portrait hole to go eat breakfast.

Harry finally spoke, “I saw Hermione earlier. She didn’t even speak to me.”

Ginny answered easily, “After I slapped her last night I’m not surprised.”

Harry shrugged, “I suppose. I just wish that her and Ron would get over this idea that they need to know what’s going on. If they knew, they wouldn’t want to know.”

Ginny nodded grimly, “They’ll come around. Don’t worry. If they don’t, it’s their loss.”

Harry sighed, “It’s still lonely.”

Ginny punched his arm, “What do you mean lonely? You’ve got me.”

“I know that, but you’re in a different year. I don’t really have anyone to talk to during class.” answered Harry.

“Mr. Potter, you’re not supposed to be talking in class. You’re supposed to be paying attention to the professors.” exclaimed Ginny playfully.

Harry snorted, “What do I need to listen in class for? I already know everything that the professors are going to teach.”

Ginny replied, “Good point. The rest of them don’t though. You shouldn’t be distracting them.”

Harry sighed, again, “I guess. It’s still not any fun having your two best friends mad at you for doing the right thing.”

“I thought I was your best friend.” said Ginny.

Harry looked deep into her chocolate brown eyes, “Ginny, you are so much more than my best friend. I love you.”

Ginny smiled and reached up to kiss Harry on the lips, “You’re too sweet.”

Harry grinned, “I know. Let’s go ahead and go eat.”

The two sat down at the Gryffindor Tower across from Neville. Luna was sitting beside him. “Hey, guys.” Harry greeted them. Ron walked in a moment later and sat by Hermione a little ways down the table. Harry sighed, again.

Neville shook his head, “Don’t worry, Harry. They’ll get over it.”

Harry chuckled, “That’s what Ginny said.”

Neville nodded wisely, “Sage advice.”

The four talked over breakfast until it was time to go to class. Harry headed for Transfiguration. He walked in and decided to take a seat in the back by himself instead of going to Hermione and his normal table. Hermione strode past him a moment later and took her normal place at the front of the class. The rest of the class filed in, closely followed by Professor McGonagall. She swept up to the front of the class and then turned to insure that the entire class was present. She noticed that Hermione and Harry were sitting apart. She locked eyes with Harry, and raised her eyebrows in question. Harry just shrugged in response.

McGonagall nodded and then began her class, “Today, students we will begin studying Advanced Conjuraction.”

Hermione raised her hand. “Yes, Miss Granger.”

"I thought that we were studying conjuration in Charms class, Professor?" asked Hermione.

"The study of Conjuration falls under the heading of Transfiguration. However, since there is great deal more information to cover at N.E.W.T. level in Transfiguration than there is in Charms, Professor Flitwick covers the rudiments of Conjuration for me." explained McGonagall.

Terry Boot raised his hand, "What if someone takes Transfiguration and doesn't take Charms."

"That is impossible, Mr. Boot. One of the prerequisites to enter my Transfiguration class at N.E.W.T. level is that you achieve an O.W.L. in Charms and continue it into N.E.W.T.'s." explained McGonagall.

The class chorused, "Oh."

"Now, onto Conjuration. We will be beginning with pillows. Everyone follow my wand movement." began McGonagall.

The class continued to practice conjuring pillows. Harry sat in the back and half napped, instead of practicing. McGonagall walked over to him, "Potter, I do not tolerate people sleeping in my class."

Harry answered, "I wasn't sleeping, I was just resting my eyes."

"How do you expect to learn how to do this if you don't open your eyes to look?" said McGonagall in a tight voice.

Harry took out his wand and waved it. A fluffy pillow appeared on the desk. "I already know how to do it."

McGonagall asked quietly, "Them, why are you in the class?"

Harry shrugged, "You never know when you might teach something that I don't know. I'll need to be here, then."

"Very well, Mr. Potter, just try not to doze so obviously. It sets a bad example for the rest of the class." McGonagall stated.

The class ended, and the only person to make any progress towards conjuring a pillow was Hermione. Although her pillow was lopsided and extremely lumpy. The bell rang and the students bolted from the class. Harry went outside and walked down to Hagrid's hut.

"Hey, Arry." shouted Hagrid.

Harry smiled, "Cheers, Hagrid."

"What's a matter, Arry?" asked Hagrid.

Harry shrugged, "Not much. Hermione and Ron aren't talking to me, again."

Hagrid frowned, "Again?"

Harry nodded, "It seems to be a cycle. They keep getting upset with me, because I won't let them in on..." Harry paused while he looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. "Order business."

Hagrid nodded, "I understand. They wanna know whats goin on, but you wanna protect 'em."

Harry sighed, "It's not just that. I attacked Malfoy on the train and Hermione tried to give me a lecture about it. Ginny got mad at her, and slapped her."

Hagrid looked horrified, "She din't."

Harry nodded, "Yes, she did. Ginny gets really protective when it comes to me."

Hagrid grinned into his beard, "Yeah, she does. I saw her shout at sev' ral of her classmates las' year for makin fun of you."

Harry laughed, "That sounds like Ginny. Enough about that, though. Dumbledore told me that you were wanting to go into the forest. I'm supposed to be going with you to serve my detention."

Hagrid grinned, "Ye'll haf to wait an see. Meet me here at 8:00."

Harry nodded, "Alright, then. If you want to surprise me, then I'll just have to keep a few surprises in store for you."

Hagrid laughed, "Fair nough. See ya later, Harry."

Harry waved as he set off for the castle. He went to his common sword practice room. He began dueling two different statues. Ginny caught up with him a little later. She put her hands on her hips and called out his name, "Harry."

He stopped dueling, and asked, "What?"

"It's lunchtime, you know."

Harry looked down at his watch, and said sheepishly, "Oh. Sorry. I guess I let time get away from me."

Ginny nodded her head, "I'll just bet you did. Come on, hurry up."

"I've just got to tidy up in here." He vanished the swords, and sent the statues scurrying back into their niches along the wall.

Ginny looked at him proudly, "You know, you're starting to get really good at that."

"Which one? Conjuring the swords, Vanishing the swords, Sword fighting, or Animating objects?" asked Harry curiously.

Ginny paused in thought, "Well, actually, I was talking about the object animation and control, but come to think of it, you're really good at all of them."

Harry snorted, "Are you trying to score brownie points with the dueling club teacher, again?"

Ginny shook her head, "No, I just love you, and decided that I like giving you compliments."

Harry grinned playfully, "You like to fish for return compliments is what you like doing."

Ginny grinned, "Yeah, well, that too."

"Let's go eat."

Ginny pretended to pout, "Don't I get a compliment?"

Harry shook his head, "No, I think that I have been giving you too many recently. I'm going to have to start rationing out the compliments. I think that two a day is enough, don't you?"

Ginny turned red, "No, I don't think that is nearly enough. To maintain my affection, I need to hear at least ten."

Harry responded as the two walked into the Great Hall, "What is this, a negotiation? How about five?"

Ginny nodded, "That sounds pretty good. I guess that I can live with five."

Neville looked at them curiously, "What are the two of you going on about?"

Harry replied, "We were negotiating about how many compliments I have to give Ginny each day."

Ginny nodded, "Yeah, we decided on five."

Neville looked from one to the other, "Are you joking?"

Harry and Ginny both laughed at the expression on Neville's face, "Of course, we're joking."

"So, what were you really talking about?" asked Luna.

Ginny answered, "That's what we were really talking about. We were joking with each other."

Luna smiled dreamily, and poked Neville in the ribs, "Isn't that romantic?"

Neville looked panicked, "Yeah, I guess."

Harry and Ginny burst out laughing at him again. The four ate lunch quickly and then headed for class. Harry trudged off to Potions, while Neville headed for Care of Magical Creatures. Luna and Ginny went for Herbology.

Harry walked into the dungeon classroom, and again decided to sit near the back of the room. Hermione marched in and sat down in her customary place as usual. Snape swept into the room in his customary manner, but paused for just a moment beside Harry's table to unobtrusively drop a slip of parchment into his lap. Snape continued on to the front of the room, and began, "Today, we will be brewing a poison that is based on the seeds of a Venomous Tentacula. I have obtained the seeds that you will need to use from Professor Sprout." He waved his wand at the board, and the instructions for the potion appeared. "There are your instructions, the seeds are in the cupboard, you may begin."

While Snape was issuing the directions for the day, Harry inconspicuously opened the parchment. The note was simple and straightforward.

Double back after class. I need to speak with you.

Snape

Harry read the note twice to insure that it actually said what he thought it said. He shrugged and began preparing the potion for the day. He finished before anyone else, and sat watching the rest of the class after he had corked a vial for marking. He vanished the rest of the poison and finished cleaning up.

Snape walked by, and commented on Malfoy's potion. "Excellent brew, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy muttered softly, but loud enough for Snape and Harry to hear, "Keep your praise, you filthy traitor."

Harry almost gasped in shock at the statement. Snape's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. He caught Harry's eye as he turned away, and gave him a warning glance. Harry nodded in understanding.

The rest of the class completed their poisons and turned in a vial. Snape took them all, and dismissed the class. Harry left at the front of the group, and took several meandering corridors to return to the dungeon classroom a few minutes later. He walked in to discover Snape still sitting behind his desk. "Close the door, Potter."

Harry shut the door and leaned against the edge of a table in front of Snape's desk, "So, what do you want to discuss with me?"

"I need to understand something, Potter. Do you really intend to go through with this plan of yours in Hogsmeade?"

Harry nodded, "I don't see that we have much of a choice. Voldemort wants Ginny, and I have to give him a reason to hesitate trying to take her."

"What if he takes her?" asked Snape.

"Then, I'll be dead and it will be up to someone else to save her. If I'm dead though, he doesn't have much reason to want her. The only reason that Ginny is important is me." answered Harry.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Snape.

"Exactly what I said. I couldn't figure out at first why Voldemort would want Ginny. Now, I know why."

"Why?" persisted Snape.

"He thinks that she has information about my powers. It didn't click in my mind until I found out that Draco had taken the Dark Mark." answered Harry.

Snape paled, "Draco has taken the Dark Mark?"

Harry nodded, "Over the holidays. I sensed it on the train ride back, and used a spell to check. The burning was fresh."

"How did you know how the Dark Mark was placed on a Death Eater." questioned Snape.

Harry replied easily, "You would be surprised at what I know, Professor."

"Perhaps." Snape replied cryptically. "The question is, do you know enough to challenge the Dark Lord?"

Harry shrugged, "I have no idea, but I expect that we will be finding out sooner than anyone would want. Is there anything else?"

Snape shook his head, "No, that is all."

Harry nodded, and left the room.

The dueling club that night was interesting. Ron and Hermione didn't show up. Harry began some simple sword and wand combination techniques that kept the students busy for awhile. He went to dinner with Ginny, and as soon as he was finished eating, stood up to join Hagrid. He leaned over and pecked Ginny on the cheek, "I've got to go and meet Hagrid in just a bit. Don't wait up. I don't know how long we will be."

Ginny shook her head, "You know that I am going to wait up. Nothing could make me go to sleep."

Harry sighed in defeat, "Alright, but at least try to take a nap. You need your sleep. You've got O.W.L.'s coming up."

Ginny nodded, "I'll try, but I don't know how I'm going to get any sleep knowing that you are going into the Forbidden Forest."

Harry grinned, "Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything stupid. I'll be careful."

"You better be, Mr. Potter." Ginny said sternly.

Harry grinned, and pecked her on the cheek again, "Bye, love. I'll be back later."

She nodded, but didn't respond. Ron sat down in the seat that Harry had just vacated. "Where is he going?"

Ginny snapped at Ron, "If Harry thought that it was any of your business, then he would have told you." She got up and stomped away.

Ron looked over at Neville, "What is her problem?"

Neville looked at him, and waited a moment to speak, "I would say that she's upset about the fact that her brother is acting like a prat concerning his best friend and her boyfriend." Neville got up and walked away from the table, leaving Ron gaping. Luna followed him shooting Ron a dirty look as she passed.

Hermione came over and sat down beside Ron. "What was that all about?"

Ron looked grim, "I just got told off by Ginny and Neville."

"Harry?" asked Hermione expectantly.

Ron nodded, "Of course. You know, Hermione, maybe Ginny's right."

"About what?"

Ron hesitated, but finally said, "About Harry. Maybe we don't need to know. Maybe there is a really good reason that he's not telling us anything."

Hermione sniffed, "No reason is good enough for him to leave us in the dark."

Ron replied sagely, "We left him out in the dark last summer."

Hermione protested, "That was different. We wanted to tell him. Dumbledore made us swear that we wouldn't tell him anything."

Ron nodded, "So, that was a good reason. Maybe he has one too."

Hermione sighed, "I want to know what is going on."

“So do I, Hermione, but I don’t think that not talking to Harry is going to accomplish anything. He sure isn’t going to tell us anything when we’re acting like spoiled brats.”

Hermione let out a long breath, “Alright, we can apologize at breakfast in the morning if we don’t see him tonight.”

Meanwhile, Harry had walked down to Hagrid’s hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid was just emerging from his front door, carrying his crossbow and a lantern. Fang was with him. Fang bounded forward to Harry, who smiled and scratched him behind the ears. “So, what are we going into the forest to do, Hagrid?”

“We’re settin traps, Arry. Dumbledore wants em just in case the Death Eaters try summat in the forest.” answered Hagrid. “Ye’ll need a lamp.”

Harry shook his head, “No, I won’t. I’ll be running scout while you set each trap. The less light the better.”

“Ye canta see without sum light, Arry.” protested Hagrid.

Harry smiled, “That’s what you think, Hagrid. The moonlight is plenty of light for me. Wait until we’re under cover in the trees and I’ll show you the surprise I have in store for you.”

Hagrid nodded, “Alrigh, Arry. Let’s go.”

The two walked into the forest. As soon as they were out of sight of prying eyes, Harry transformed into a panther. Hagrid gave a strangled gasp, and Fang howled in terror at the sight of the panther. Harry quickly transformed back so that he could talk. “You see, I don’t need a light.”

Hagrid looked amazed, “I din’t know ye could do that, Arry.”

Harry grinned, “Not many people do. It’s supposed to be a secret, but I figured that we could trust you with it. Now, let’s get busy. Ginny is going to be waiting up for me, so I don’t want to be too late getting back in.”

Hagrid nodded as Harry transformed back into the panther. The two set off into the forest with Fang following at a skittish distance. They finished setting traps in one quadrant of the forest, and Harry left Hagrid at his hut around midnight. Harry loped up to the castle on four legs. He transformed at the door, and walked in. Harry walked up to the portrait hole, and gave the Fat Lady the password. He walked in to discover Ginny lying asleep over her books. Harry smiled, and picked her up. He walked over to the stairs leading to the girl’s dormitory. He cast a levitation spell on himself and moved up the stairs. They flattened into a chute beneath his feet, but since he wasn’t actually touching them his forward progress wasn’t impeded. Harry found the door for the fifth-year girls dormitory. He cast a Silencing Charm on its hinges and opened the door slowly. He found the empty bed and sat Ginny on it. He pulled back the covers, and slid her under them. He tucked the covers up underneath Ginny’s chin, and kissed her on the nose. He walked out of the room and removed the Silencing Charm from the door. He slid down the chute into the common room, and packed up Ginny’s books. He took them up to his dormitory with him, and fell onto his bed and went quickly to sleep.

The next morning, Harry was the first one up in his dormitory as usual. He dressed and went down to the common room. Hermione was sitting on the couch looking at the fire. Harry hesitated, and then walked over to the couch and sat down beside her. Hermione looked over to him and said, “Good morning.”

Harry looked hopeful, “Does this mean that you’re talking to me, again?”

Hermione nodded, “Yes. Harry, I’m sorry, but its just frustrating.”

Harry smiled, “I know the feeling well. It builds character, so you’ll just have to learn to live with it, or let it go.”

Hermione looked confused, “How am I supposed to stop feeling frustrated?”

“Stop worrying about what is frustrating you.” stated Harry simply.

Hermione shook her head, “I can’t. I want to know what is going on.”

Harry nodded, “I know that. However, there are reasons that it is better for you not to know for the time being. I can tell you this, however. The next time we go to Hogsmeade, keep your hand on your wand.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows, “Does this mean that there is going to be an attack?”

Harry nodded, “Don’t spread that information around, though. The last thing we need is a panic among the students and their parents.”

Hermione nodded soberly, “Are they going to be after you?”

Harry shook his head, “No, they have a very different target. They’re going to have to go through me to get to the target, however.”

“Can you tell me who it is?” asked Hermione.

Harry shook his head, “No, but it shouldn’t be too difficult for someone as smart as you to figure it out.”

“Ginny.” stated Hermione firmly.

Harry merely shrugged, but Hermione knew that she was right. Ginny came down the stairs a moment later, “Harry Potter, you were supposed to wake me up when you got back last night. How did I get up into my room anyway?”

Harry chuckled, “I’m sorry, but you just looked so cute sleeping that I didn’t have the heart to wake you.”

Ginny nodded, “Okay, but how did I get up to my room?”

“I carried you up there.” answered Harry.

Hermione spluttered, “That’s impossible. Boys can’t walk up the girl’s stairs.”

“Very true, Hermione. However, I floated up the stairs, so that doesn’t count.” answered Harry.

Hermione continued to splutter, “How did you float up the stairs? You can’t maintain a levitation spell on yourself. No one can.”

Harry asked with a smirk on his face, “Why not?”

“You.. You just can’t.” stammered Hermione.

Harry leaned forward all traces of amusement or playfulness gone, “Hermione, the word can’t does not apply to me.” He got up and took Ginny’s hand, “Let’s go eat breakfast.”

Hermione just stared after them in consternation. Ron came down a minute later to find Hermione staring off into space. “What’s wrong with you?” Ron waved a hand in front of Hermione’s face.

She looked at him and said, “Harry just told me that the word can’t doesn’t apply to him.”

Ron looked confused, “What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean?”

Hermione just shrugged, “I don’t know exactly, but I intend to find out.”

The two got up, and walked out the portrait hole. They met up with Harry and Ginny. Neville and Luna joined them a few minutes later. As usual Hermione was chattering about class. “I wonder what Professor Flitwick is going to begin in Charms, now.”

Neville laughed, “Why don’t you just wait and find out when we get there?”

Hermione pouted, “I don’t want to wait.”

Ron inserted, “Well, speculating about it isn’t going to make you find out any sooner.”

The four sixth years headed for Double Charms, and Ginny and Luna headed off for their classes. The four took seats at the front of the class. Professor Flitwick climbed up onto his desk, and began class. "Today, we will begin object animation. We will start small. I have provided a box of toy soldiers. Everyone get one, and we will begin. The class got up and each of them took one toy. Harry waited until everyone had one, and then grabbed the remaining six.

Flitwick began talking, "The wand movement for this spell is a triangle followed by a whipping stab like this." He demonstrated. "The incantation is Animata, and then what you are attempting to animate. Like this." He pointed to one of the toy soldiers. "Animata soldier." The soldier marched around the desk. Then, it stopped and fell over onto its side. Flitwick continued, "Once the spell has been cast, you can maintain the object's movement through concentration. It does not require you to keep your wand pointed at it. This spell is very demanding, and few wizards can perform other magic while doing it. Some really powerful wizards can maintain the spell on multiple objects at the same time."

At this time Flitwick noticed what Harry was doing. He gave a squeak, and shouted, "Mr. Potter, what are you doing?" The rest of the class turned to look at Harry.

Harry had six of the toy soldiers and was watching them fight. They were pulling off some impressive martial arts feats, and the rest of the class stared in awe. Harry looked up, "I'm sorry, Professor. I was playing. I guess you shouldn't have given me a toy."

Professor Flitwick shook his head and blinked his eyes to make sure that he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. He finally managed to find his voice, "Mr. Potter, do you realize what you are doing?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, I was playing."

Professor Flitwick shook his head, "No, I mean the fact that you are animating multiple objects."

Harry nodded, again, "I know. I do it all the time."

Professor Flitwick fell off his desk in shock. He staggered back to his feet and asked in amazement, "What do you mean, you do it all the time?"

Harry answered, "I use statues to practice my swordplay, so I had to learn the object animation spell early. I got the idea from Professor Dumbledore."

"When did Professor Dumbledore use the object animation spell in front of you?" asked Flitwick.

Harry replied stiffly, "Last summer, in the Ministry of Magic. He animated all the statues in the fountain."

Professor Flitwick nodded, "Yes, Professor Dumbledore is very gifted. He is one of the few people alive that can manipulate multiple objects and still perform other magic. Enough of that, however." Flitwick climbed back up onto his desk. "The rest of you will attempt this now."

The rest of the class attempted to animate their soldiers. Hermione managed to get hers to take one step. No one else got the slightest movement from their soldier. Harry continued to play with his six soldiers. The class ended, and the students filed out either complaining about their lack of progress, or commenting about Harry's ability in jealousy.

"Mr. Potter, may I have a word with you?" asked Professor Flitwick.

Harry turned around, "Of course, Professor."

Flitwick waited until the rest of the class had left, and then he asked, "Can you do magic, while you are animating objects?"

Harry nodded, "I haven't practiced it much, but I know that I can."

Flitwick grinned eagerly, "Could you demonstrate?"

Harry nodded, again, "Sure, Professor." Harry turned and performed the wand motion, "Animata soldiers." Then, he looked around the room while the soldiers marched around in formation. "Wingardium Leviosa." He levitated Flitwick's desk.

While he was doing this, Flitwick decided to test his concentration and skill. "Tarantellegra."

Harry shifted slightly, "Protego." The shield flared into existence and deflected the curse into the wall. Harry waited a moment, and then allowed the soldiers to stop marching, and the desk to settle back to the floor. "I'm afraid you will have to do a little better than that to get the jump on me, Professor."

Flitwick smiled, "I see that, Mr. Potter. I am very impressed. You may go."

Harry picked up his stuff and left the classroom. The rest of the day passed without anything out of the ordinary occurring. After dinner, Harry pecked Ginny good-bye and headed out of the castle to aid Hagrid again. The two entered a different section of the forest, and Hagrid began setting traps while Harry kept watch for other creatures. About four hours later, they completed this section of the forest and Harry loped back up to the castle. He transformed at the doors, and then walked up to Gryffindor tower.

He was stopped by Filch, "Well, Mr. Potter, you are going to be in a spot of trouble aren't you?"

Harry turned to the caretaker, coolly and asked, "Why is that?"

Filch frowned, "You are out after hours, and I will have you polishing silver for this."

Harry grinned, "I think not. The headmaster knows that I am out. I was just returning from helping Hagrid in the forest. Since I have permission to still be out, I don't see that you have any reason to delay me further. I was returning to the tower." Harry turned and began walking away.

Filch grabbed his arm, "I will be taking you to the headmaster, boy. We will see if he really knows you are out and about."

Harry gazed coldly at Filch, "I suggest you take your hands off of me if you know what's good for you. You can go speak to the headmaster if you wish. I am returning to Gryffindor tower."

Filch tightened his grip on Harry, "You will be coming with me, boy."

"I warned you." stated Harry simply. An electrical jolt ran up Filch's arm. He released Harry quickly. "Now, I will be returning to Gryffindor tower. If you know what is good for you, I suggest you leave me alone." Harry spun on his heel and walked away. Filch made no attempt to stop him. Harry walked up to the Fat Lady, and gave her the password. Harry climbed through the portrait hole to find Ginny lying on the couch. He smiled down at her, and she opened her eyes.

She stretched languidly and said, "It's about time that you got back."

Harry snorted, "Sorry. I ran into that idiot Filch or I would have been back a little earlier."

Ginny smiled, "No matter. Come here."

Harry laid down on the couch beside her, and wrapped his arms around her. Ginny laid her head on his shoulder and said, "Let's just sleep down here tonight."

Harry replied, "Okay." He conjured a blanket for them, and the two quickly fell asleep.

Harry awoke the next morning to a soft touch upon his arm. He looked over to find Hermione staring at him disapprovingly. "You know," she said, "the two of you can't make a habit of this. I'm going to have to start giving you detention if you continue."

Harry shook his head, "We are not making a habit of it. This is only the second time."

Hermione nodded, "True, but unless you want Ron to see you in this position with his sister, then I suggest that you get up."

Harry nodded, "Good point. Gin, hon, wake up."

Ginny stirred, "Do I have to?"

“Unless you want Ron to kill me for sleeping with his sister.” Harry answered dryly.

Ginny jumped up and grinned, “Well, we can’t have that, now can we?” She looked at Hermione, “Morning.” Then, she raced up the stairs to the girl’s dormitory.

Harry muttered under his breath, “That girl is completely mental.”

Even though the statement was made so softly, Hermione still heard it and smiled at Harry’s back as he trekked up the stairs to his room.

The rest of the week passed quickly. Harry continued his detentions with Hagrid. They finished setting traps in the forest on Friday. The dueling club met on Thursday, and continued practicing basic wand and sword combinations. The weekend was filled with homework and play. Ginny especially was starting to feel the stress of O.W.L. year. Harry helped her as much as he could. With Monday, came another dueling club meeting. Then, finally it was Tuesday, and time for the first Gryffindor Quidditch practice of the term.

The team met in the changing rooms at five o’clock. Harry came out of the captain’s office, and said, “Alright, we have five weeks until we play Hufflepuff. I’m not terribly worried about winning, here. I don’t really intend to insult anyone, but after the way Ravenclaw steamrolled them last term, I really don’t see them being much of a challenge. They have got a pretty weak side this year. So, what I want us to do is concentrate on running the score up. Slytherin is playing Ravenclaw, and whichever of them win will be in second place in the standings behind us. If its Ravenclaw, we will play them next term for the cup. If Slytherin wins, we are going to have to watch the score differentials. If we beat Ravenclaw by the skin of our teeth and they hammer Hufflepuff, then we could be looking at a close run on points. So, let’s get fired up and see if we can’t pad our position a little bit against Hufflepuff. We’re going to change strategy a little bit. Dean, I want you to cover the Chasers. Play defensive. We don’t really have to worry about hammering their Chasers much. Ron can handle them at goal. Seamus, I want you to mark their Seeker. They are playing Eleanor Branstone. She has the making of a really good Seeker, but she just doesn’t have the confidence, yet. Don’t try to actually hit her with the Bludger, but hammer it in her direction every chance you get. I want her rattled and wary, so that I can hold off catching the Snitch until our magic trio run the score up a bit. I don’t want to give those Slytherin’s a chance at the Cup. It’s going to be ours again.”

The group of players cheered at Harry’s speech. Then, they went out onto the pitch and practiced every play, flawlessly. Harry was extremely proud of his team. He stopped in the air and blew his whistle. “Alright everyone, its time to quit. Let’s head in.”

The Gryffindors entered the Great Hall in buoyant spirits that evening to eat dinner.

The rest of this week and then the next one passed in much the same manner. On Mondays and Thursdays, they had dueling club. On Tuesday, they had Quidditch practice. Finally, it was the end of the third week, and the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term. After dinner, on Friday Harry and Ginny turned away from their friends, and began walking in a different direction. Ron hollered after them, “Hey, where are you two going?”

Harry waved him off, “Ginny and I are going to talk to the Headmaster. We’ll meet up with you later in the common room.” The two of them arrived at the gargoye leading to Dumbledore’s office. “Honeydukes.” Harry said. The gargoye leaped to one side, and Harry led Ginny up the circular stairs into Dumbledore’s office. Dumbledore had not returned from dinner, yet. So, Harry and Ginny each took a seat to wait for him.

A few minutes later, Dumbledore strode in and smiled at the two teenagers, “Ah, Harry, I expected you to be here. I am surprised that Miss Weasley is accompanying you, however.”

Harry shrugged as Dumbledore took his seat behind his desk, “The only thing that I really came here to discuss was the plan for tomorrow, and since she’s the main thing that we are protecting, I figured she had a right to be here.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Quite right. Quite right. Miss Weasley, the battle plan is quite simple. We want you to stick as close as possible to Harry. We have numerous Order members and Aurors that will be stationed and ready for the attack. However, when the Death Eaters do show up, most of the people in the village are going to panic. There is going to be a great deal of confusion. So, you are going to have to stay ready to defend yourself in the event that any of the Death Eaters manages to get to you. I know you have been trained well for this. However, I must ask you one last time. Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

Ginny nodded, “I agree with Harry. This is the only real option that we have.”

Harry squeezed Ginny’s hand, and then turned to Professor Dumbledore, “Are all the people that we discussed going to be present in the village?”

Dumbledore nodded, “Yes, all of them will be there. I just hope its enough.”

Harry consoled him, “Don’t worry, Professor, it will be.”

The next morning Harry awoke and picked up his wand from his bedside table. He played the conversation from the night before over in his mind. He breathed deeply. Ron woke up and looked over at him, “What’s the matter, mate?”

Harry shook his head, but finally spoke, “Ron, promise me something.”

Ron nodded, “Sure. Anything.”

“When the curses start flying, today, promise me that you will grab Hermione and stay low.” said Harry.

“Okay. I’ll do it, but I want to know why they are attacking.” said Ron.

Harry shrugged, “They want the key to defeating me.”

“What’s that?” asked Ron.

“They think that it is your sister.” responded Harry.

Ron’s eyes narrowed, “They’re after my sister?”

“Unfortunately. They think that since she is my girlfriend, that she will know enough about my abilities to give Voldemort an edge when he fights me.” explained Harry.

Ron looked thoughtful, “Does she?”

Harry shook his head, “No, Voldemort doesn’t need any advantages to beat me. He thinks that he does, which is why he hasn’t already busted up into the castle with all his Death Eaters and dark creatures to take over. Voldemort knows that if he takes Hogwarts, he will have eliminated the only two enemies that he has to worry about.”

“Are you saying that You-Know-Who is afraid of you?” asked Ron incredulously.

Harry nodded, “Yes, Ron, that is exactly what I am saying.”

“Why?”

Harry sighed, “That’s not something that I’m prepared to tell you, yet. You’ll just have to wait and be patient.”

“Alright, but I don’t have to like it.” muttered Ron.

Harry replied, “I’m not asking you to like it. I’m asking you to accept it.” Harry got up and walked out of the dormitory to get ready for the day.

The five Gryffindors met Luna downstairs in the Great Hall for a late breakfast. After they were done, they got up to head down to Hogsmeade. They stood in line in the entrance while Filch checked each student off the list. When Harry and his friends got up to the door, Filch stopped them. “You are not allowed to go into Hogsmeade today, Potter. You will be serving detention with me all day.”

Harry snorted, “By whose authority do you think that you are going to stop me from going into the village?”

Filch turned red with rage, “By mine, boy. You will do as I say.”

“I think that you better go back and check your job description. You are only allowed to recommend punishment. You have to have a professor to back you up to actually assign a punishment. Since I do not see a professor with you, I suggest that you step back out of my way.” Harry said coldly.

Filch struck Harry across the face, “You will not talk back to me, boy.”

Harry pulled his wand out and yelled, “Stupefy.” Filch fell over backwards.

“Potter, what do you think that you are doing?” rang out the oily voice of Snape.

“Filch hit me, Professor. I retaliated.” answered Harry simply.

Snape looked skeptical, “Why would Filch hit you, Harry? He knows that striking a student is cause for Dumbledore to dismiss him.”

Harry waved his wand over Filch’s body. It glowed red. “There’s your answer. He is under the influence of the Imperious Curse.”

Snape stared in shock as Dumbledore walked into the Entrance Hall. “What is going on, Harry?”

Harry pointed to Filch’s glowing body, “I would say that someone is trying to stop me from going into the village, today.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I see. Well, this is nothing for you to concern yourself with. Go ahead and enjoy your day in the village, Harry.” Dumbledore said all of this in a loud voice, for the benefit of the surrounding students. His eyes, however, held a grim look that Harry locked onto. He nodded to Dumbledore in reassurance of the fact that he understood the significance of the matter.

The group walked out of the castle and headed down the path to the village. Neville looked over at Harry, “Harry, do you have an idea of why anyone would want to stop you from getting into the village?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, I do.” He checked to make sure none of the other groups of students around them were too close. Then, he whispered, “There is going to be an attack in a little while in the village. Someone wanted to make sure that I was still in the castle when the attack happened.”

Hermione leaned closer to Harry, “Who would want to do that?”

Harry snorted, “Malfoy.”

Hermione looked skeptical, “Malfoy may be a pain, but he doesn’t take an active hand in his father’s business. There must be somebody else.”

Harry shook his head, “No, it was Malfoy. He has the Dark Mark, now. He’s actually been accepted as a Death Eater.”

The rest of the group looked horrified. Ron stammered, “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded, “I saw the mark on his arm while we were on the train.”

Ginny looked as if she suddenly understood something, “That’s why you were so savage with him.”

Harry smirked, “Yeah, I guess. Anyway, when the attack starts today, I want all of you to take cover. I’ve got Auror backup so there’s no reason for you to get out in the middle of things. Just stay down. If the fight comes to you, though. Give them everything that you’ve got.”

Ron grinned, “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Harry looked at him sharply, “No heroics, Ron. I’m serious. I’ll stun you myself if you do anything stupid.”

Hermione asked, “What if you do something stupid?”

Harry shrugged, “I’m allowed.”

Ron protested, “If you’re allowed to do something stupid, why can’t I?”

Harry snickered, “Trademark infringement. I’ve got the monopoly on doing stupid stuff to get landed in the hospital wing.”

All of them laughed except for Ginny. “It’s not funny. Harry gets put in the hospital wing all the time.”

Harry smiled at her, “Gin, it was just a joke. Everyone knows that I get put in the hospital wing all the time. I’m always okay, though.”

Ginny subsided, “Alright, just don’t make jokes about you getting hurt. I don’t like it.”

The rest of the group hid grins from Ginny while Harry said, “Okay, Gin. I promise not to make anymore jokes about it.”

They spent the morning wandering around Hogsmeade. They ate lunch at the Three Broomsticks. After they were finished eating, they walked back outside and suddenly there were several pops. Six Death Eaters appeared with a whole group of Dementors. Several of the villagers screamed and fled along with a number of the students.

Harry shouted at the others. “Get down. Expecto Patronum.” Three Patroni exploded from the end of his wand and headed for the Dementors. They were quickly joined by several more. Harry turned his attention to the group of Death Eaters. He began hurling hexes at them. Harry took cover by an overturned trash bin. He was quickly joined by the Weasley twins. Harry looked over, “How are we doing?”

Fred Weasley shook his head, “Not good. Sturgis and that Adams bloke are already down. Those Death Eaters hit fast and hard with those Dementors. Lupin, Kingsley, and Amos Diggory are keeping the Dementors at bay. Two of the Death Eaters have got Mad-Eye and Bill pinned down behind the Post Office, and Dawlish is trying to herd students.”

George chimed in as he sent a stunner sailing at the Death Eaters. “That leaves four of these idiots for us.”

Fred spoke again, “Can’t say that I like the odds. He sent a couple of Disarming Charms flying.”

Harry grinned, “I guess its time to even the odds. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville, Patronus Charms right at the fold of Dementors. Stay down.” Harry nodded to the twins. “See you on the other side.” He jumped up and began raining curses at the four Death Eaters. Fred and George tried to cover him. Harry took out one of the Death Eaters with a Full-Body Bind. He tackled one of the Death Eaters that was pinning down Mad-Eye and Bill.

Alastor sent an Explosion Hex at the overhang above the second one. It fell down on him, smashing the Death Eater. Harry clubbed the one he tackled over the head with a rock that he summoned to himself, and then snapped his wand. He blocked a couple of curses with a Shield Charm and then dove behind cover with Moody and Bill. Bill was bleeding from a cut on his arm. Harry ripped off the sleeve of his robes, and said, “Hold pressure on it with this. What happened?”

Bill grunted in pain, “I took a Cutting Curse from one of them.”

Harry nodded, “Stay here, then. Come on, Mad Eye. There are still three of them out there. Not to mention those damn Dementors.”

Moody flashed a feral grin, “Lead the way, Potter.”

Harry spared Bill one last glance, “Be careful.” Bill nodded in response. Harry popped up, “Expecto Patronum.” This sent three more silver stags to try and repulse the Dementors. He shot a look over his shoulder at Moody, “What the hell has Voldemort done to those Dementors. Those Patroni should have sent them packing by now.”

Moody shrugged as the two stayed low to the ground and headed for the twins. Harry saw Dawlish and Diggorry go down. However, by now several of the villagers had gotten organized and had fired Patroni into the group of Dementors. The Dementors were finally backing off from Lupin and Kingsley, both of which looked as if they had been through the mill.

Harry heard a familiar scream and looked quickly for the source. Two more Death Eaters had Apparated beside Ginny and had grabbed her. Harry took off running in anger. One of the Death Eaters sent an Avada Kedavra Curse sailing at him. Harry dove under it and resorted to martial arts to get the Death Eaters away from Ginny. To give her credit, Ginny was fighting against them tooth and nail. Harry caught one of the two with a snap kick to the side of the head. He staggered back while Harry spun and hammered a knife hand strike to the other's throat. Harry grabbed Ginny and threw her bodily behind him. He whipped his wand up and around and shouted, "Explodra."

The two Death Eaters flew backwards from the force of the explosion. Their tattered bodies hit the ground like sacks of potatoes and lay still. Harry spun to block two more curses, "Protego."

Ginny screamed, "Harry, look out."

Harry spun, but was just a split second too late. The Death Eater was too close as he said, "Cuttera." The Cutting Curse caught Harry from his right shoulder to his left hip.

Harry screamed in pain, as Fred Weasley yelled out, "Stupefy." The stunner caught the Death Eater and he flopped to the ground. Ginny noticed that as he fell, his mask came off. She recognized him as Lucius Malfoy. Two more Death Eaters ran up, but Lupin and Kingsley were right behind Ginny by this time. The two Death Eaters grabbed Lucius and Disapparated away.

Lupin shook his head, "We have to get Harry up to the castle."

Harry shook his head, "See to the others, first. I'm fine. I'll get back up to the castle myself."

Kingsley looked amazed that the boy was still on his feet. "Potter, you can't even walk. How are you going to get back up to the castle?"

Harry slumped down to his knees, and picked up a piece of wood that had broken off from the force of the Explosion Hex. He looked at it, and then waved his wand, "Portus." He looked up, "Come on, Ginny. We have to get you out of here or they'll be back with reinforcements while I'm weak." Ginny placed a finger on the piece of wood and she and Harry disappeared.

Kingsley and Remus exchanged surprised glances, but Lupin grinned, "Well, I don't guess that we should be surprised. That young man can do anything."

Kingsley smiled back, "Yes, he can. I've always heard people say that with him around, I'm not worried. The him in question was always Albus Dumbledore. Now, its Harry. I think we might win this yet."

Moody limped up to them with Bill Weasley and the twins at his side. Moody growled, "You bet we'll win it. I'd follow that Potter boy into the bowels of hell if he asked it of me. You just can't go wrong with him."

The twins bubbled with enthusiasm from their first battle, "He's dating our sister. That means he's like family."

Bill Weasley grinned, "He was family long before he started dating Ginny. Anyone should be proud to know that young man." The group shared one last grin and then set to work cleaning up the mess. Several more Ministry Aurors and personnel showed up on the scene.

Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna came running up to Lupin, "Where's Harry and Ginny?" they chorused.

Lupin held up his hands, "Harry was injured, so they took a Portkey back up to the castle."

Hermione paled, while Neville asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

Lupin nodded, "He's had worse many times over. He'll be fine. The four of you need to head back up to the castle with the other students."

They nodded and started up the road back towards Hogwarts.

Harry and Ginny appeared in the floor of the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey gasped in surprise, "Mr. Potter, what do you think you are doing. You scared the life out of me." She paused as she noticed the blood dripping from Harry's robes and chest onto the floor. She immediately sprang into action, "Miss Weasley, help me get him onto the bed."

Ginny and Madam Pomfrey wrestled Harry onto the bed, and Madam Pomfrey quickly pulled his robes from his upper body. Ginny blushed slightly at seeing Harry's bare chest, but she said nothing. "Is he going to be alright, Madam Pomfrey?" asked Ginny, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

Madam Pomfrey began spreading some pungent salve onto the wound. "I daresay that he will be fine. I've cured worse. I'm afraid that the cut is deep enough that it is going to scar, however." She continued to work diligently, while Ginny stood by and watched. Finally, the wound was closed and the blood cleaned up. Madam Pomfrey looked over to Ginny, "I'm sure that he will sleep for a little while. You may remain at his side until he wakes up."

Ginny nodded, mutely. A moment later Dumbledore walked in looking very weary. "How is he, Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey replied, "He's going to be just fine, Albus. He'll probably sleep for awhile."

Dumbledore nodded, and then turned to Ginny, "Miss Weasley, how are you doing?"

Ginny sniffled, "I'm okay, but I'm worried about Harry. Why does he do the things that he does, sir?"

Dumbledore sighed, "I don't know, Ginny. He feels that it is his responsibility to save the world."

Ginny grinned ruefully, "Doesn't he?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. However, he doesn't have to try and do it everyday."

The other four came rushing into the Hospital wing at this moment. They all began babbling at once. "Where is Harry? Is he okay? How about Ginny? Is she alright? What happened?"

Madam Pomfrey descended on the four of them wrathfully, "What do the four of you think you are doing? Be quiet. You are going to wake him up."

They all subsided under her furious gaze. Dumbledore smiled at them, "Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter are just fine. There is no need to worry. I must be going. I have other matters that require my attention." He turned to Madam Pomfrey, "Poppy, I will be returning later to check on Mr. Potter." He walked out of the Hospital Wing with a nod at the students.

Madam Pomfrey eyed them critically, "You may all wait for Mr. Potter to awaken, as long as you are quiet."

Neville spoke for the group, "We'll be quiet, Madam Pomfrey. We promise."

She nodded, and the group of students sat down around Harry's bed and watched him rest. Hermione blushed when she noticed that he had nothing covering his upper body. She caught Ginny's eyes and then flicked her eyes to Harry's well muscled chest. Ginny followed Hermione's gaze and smiled. Then, she shook her finger at Hermione. Hermione giggled as silently as possible. Ron looked back and forth between the two girls, but merely scratched his head in confusion.

About an hour later, Harry finally woke up, "So, what happened? Has Dumbledore been here yet?"

Ginny leaned forward and said, "Yes, Professor Dumbledore has been here. He said that he would be back later."

Harry nodded, "I'm sure that there will be an Order meeting this evening. I have to figure a way to get Madam Pomfrey to let me out of here to go to it."

“That will not be necessary, Harry.” Dumbledore walked around the corner. “I will speak to Poppy. We are meeting in my office in just a few minutes. The rest of the Order is waiting for us.”

Madam Pomfrey came bustling out of her office at the sound of Dumbledore’s voice, “Albus, what is the meaning of this? The boy needs rest.”

Dumbledore raised his hands, “I understand that, Poppy. However, I must insist that Harry be allowed to accompany me to my office for a while.”

Madam Pomfrey began to protest, but Harry broke in, “Please, Madam Pomfrey. I feel fine. As soon as we are through, I promise I’ll come back down here, and I’ll stay all night without complaint.”

Poppy sighed, “Oh, alright. I expect you to return as soon as you leave the Headmaster’s office.”

Harry smiled, “Thank you.” Harry waved his wand at his body and fixed his robes back around him. He slipped his wand back into his pocket as he got out of the bed. “Let’s go, Professor.” He quickly strode from the Hospital Wing with a surprised Dumbledore hot on his heels. They reached the gargoyle that guarded the stairs, and gave the password, “Honeydukes.” They walked up the circular stairs into the office. Dumbledore sat at his desk while Harry took the last remaining chair. There was a sizeable group of people in the room. Elphias Doge, Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Bill, Fred, George, Arthur, and Molly Weasley, Remus Lupin, Dedalus Diggle, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Dawlish, Tonks, Hestia Jones, Sturgis Podmore, Amos Diggory, Alastor Moody, and Mundungus Fletcher.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “I think that it is obvious as to why we are all here. The attack on Hogsmeade today by the Death Eaters rattled everyone, I am sure. Luckily we were prepared for it and there were no casualties on our side. Dawlish, I believe that you wished to ask Mr. Potter something.”

Dawlish turned to Harry with a look of awe, “What did you do to those two Death Eaters that tried to take your girlfriend, Mr. Potter?”

Harry glanced at Dumbledore and raised his eyebrows at the tone of respect in Dawlish’s voice. Dumbledore merely smiled. Harry replied, “Explosion Hex at close range. I assume that they were tore up pretty badly.”

Lupin answered, “They were dead, Harry. We checked them right after you port keyed away. They were most likely dead when they hit the ground.”

Harry nodded, “Good. Did we get anymore?”

Moody growled, “One more was killed. We captured another two. The one that hit you with the cutting curse and two more got away.”

Kingsley Shacklebolt jumped in, “The one that cut Harry was Lucius Malfoy.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, and asked, “Are you sure, Kingsley?”

Kingsley nodded, “His mask slipped off after one of the Weasley twins stunned him. I got a good look at his face.”

Harry sighed, “I guess that’s one more that I owe Lucius Malfoy. Now, I really have a score to settle with him.”

Fred Weasley looked at Harry, “I’m sorry, Harry. I was just a little too slow. I couldn’t get him in time.”

Harry waved a hand at him, “Don’t worry about it. I’m still here. I think the day was a success. Voldemort obviously has been magically enhancing his Dementors. Today we showed that we can handle them. Three dead Death Eaters and two captured is good news. I take it that the captured Death Eaters are going to be kept somewhere other than the Ministry, Dawlish?”

Dawlish answered quickly, “Yes, sir. We have a secure location set up. No one, but the Aurors that rotate guard duty know the location. That should prevent leaks.”

Dumbledore looked to Harry, “Do you think that Voldemort will try to capture Miss Weasley, again?”

Harry nodded, “I’m almost sure of it. However, he’s not going to try anything as open as an attack on Hogsmeade. He’s either going to try something subtle, or he’s going to attack the castle outright. I expect the former. I don’t think that Voldemort’s desperate enough or stupid enough to try a direct assault on the castle, yet.”

The rest of the Order nodded in agreement. Dumbledore stood, “Very well, I believe that is all for now. Mr. Potter needs to return to the Hospital wing before Madam Pomfrey storms in here after him.”

The rest of the group chuckled appreciatively at the joke. As everyone filed out, Molly grabbed Harry in a hug. “The boys told me what you did for Ginny. I don’t know how I am ever going to thank you.”

Harry grinned as he hugged Molly back, “Just don’t have a fit when I finally ask Ginny to marry me, and we’ll call it even.”

Molly pulled back from him as the Weasley men grinned, “Are you planning to ask her anytime soon?”

Harry shook his head, “I was thinking after I have defeated Voldemort, or my graduation from Hogwarts if I happen to kill him before then.”

Molly said severely, “I think that the two of you will be somewhat young.”

Harry stopped her by pointing at her, “You can’t complain. That’s the deal.” Harry flashed one last smile and then headed down the stairs.

Molly looked to Arthur in consternation, “Aren’t you going to say something to him? He can’t propose to Ginny in a year and a half.”

Arthur shrugged, “I have no intention of stopping him. I don’t think that our daughter could find a finer man. If she wants to marry him at the end of next year, I will be walking her down the aisle.”

The twins and Bill cheered, “Here, Here.”

19. Badger Blues

The next couple of weeks passed quickly. Harry kept up Quidditch practices once a week. Ginny began to fall under the mountain of homework the professors were heaping on her in her O.W.L. year. Harry spent almost every night doing his own homework as fast as he possibly could, so that he could spend the rest of the evening helping Ginny finish hers.

The week of the next Quidditch match on Monday night after the dueling club, Ginny threw up her hands in defeat, “I’ve had it. There is no way that I can get this finished tonight.”

Harry smiled, “Come on, Gin. You’re almost done. We can finish in another half an hour.”

Ginny sighed in exasperation, “Harry, we’ve been at this since we got back from dinner. It’s almost midnight. Everyone else has gone to bed. Let’s just leave it till tomorrow.”

Harry shook his head, “You can’t leave it till tomorrow. You have Potions on Tuesdays. You know that Snape is going to give you a ridiculous amount of homework. He will want to make sure that you are tired. He’ll be doing the same thing to Natalie’s class as well. He knows that if he can wear out our chasers, then we won’t be able to beat Hufflepuff that badly. Slytherin smeared Ravenclaw since two of their starting chasers were in the hospital wing from unknown causes.”

Ginny snorted, “Unknown my foot. The Slytherins hexed them.”

Harry nodded, “I know that, but there was no way to prove it. Now, come on, we’ve got to finish this.”

Ginny sighed in defeat, “This would be a lot simpler if I could just use your brain.”

Harry stopped and leaned back with a smile on his face, “You know, Ginny, that’s not a bad idea.”

She looked at him in bewilderment, “What are you talking about?”

Harry continued to smile, “You using my brain.”

Ginny grinned back, “I wish. If I knew everything that you knew, I wouldn’t have to do half the homework that I do. Charms is the only subject that I’m really good at.”

“You don’t have to wish, Ginny. We can do this.”

“Are you serious?” asked Ginny.

Harry nodded, “Of course. It will take me a little bit to prepare for the spell. I’ll have to look up a couple of things in the library, but I shouldn’t have any problem casting it tomorrow night.”

Ginny’s eyes widened, “You are serious!”

“Yes, I can allow you to siphon off information from my brain directly into yours.”

Ginny asked hesitantly, “Does that mean that I will know everything about Voldemort?”

Harry shook his head, “No, I will be in control of what information that you get. Don’t worry, I won’t allow you to get any information that might be dangerous. Now, finish your homework.”

Ginny grinned, “You’re starting to sound like Hermione.”

Harry looked horrified, “Me? I don’t sound like Hermione.”

Ginny laughed at the expression on Harry’s face, “If you keep pushing like a slave driver about homework, then the next thing you know you will be harping about people breaking the rules.”

Harry snorted, “I don’t think that I will ever be hypocritical enough to jump onto people for breaking the rules. I’m pretty sure that I have broken them all.”

“True, you probably have. Between sneaking into the Forbidden Forest, and sneaking off to the village without permission, and flying a car to school, I’m surprised that they haven’t thrown you out of school at least a dozen times already.” Ginny laughed.

Harry smirked, “Just keep talking, Weasley. Just remember that I am the only boy in Gryffindor tower that can get up the stairs to the girl’s dormitory, and I know where you sleep.”

Ginny paled, “You wouldn’t.”

Harry continued to smirk, “Wouldn’t I? You’ve just been talking about the number of rules that I have broken over the years.”

“Yes, but you weren’t dating a prefect at those times.” Ginny trumped.

Harry snorted, “I’ve had the biggest stickler for rules following me around for six years, and it hasn’t stopped me yet.”

Ginny nodded, “Good point. You win.”

Harry leaned back in the armchair that he was sitting in, and put his hands behind his head, “That’s right.”

Ginny leaped out of her own chair and tackled Harry into the floor. The two struggled for a moment, before Harry pinned Ginny to the carpet and began to tickle her mercilessly. She gasped with laughter until Harry stopped and asked, “Do you give up?”

Ginny shook her head, “No.”

Harry began to tickle her again, and she finally gasped out, “Alright, I give up.” Harry stopped tickling her, and leaned down to plant a kiss firmly on her lips.

Harry pulled away from her, “Now, its time to stop playing and you to finish your homework.”

Ginny groaned, “Slave driver.”

“We’ll see.”

The next morning the five Gryffindors met Luna in the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry looked at Ron, “Ready for out final Quidditch practice before the match?”

Ron nodded enthusiastically, “Can’t wait.”

Hermione snorted, “Boys.”

Ron protested, “Hey, the girls on the team are just as eager as the boys, aren’t they Ginny?”

Ginny nodded, “Of course. I can’t wait for the game.”

Harry nibbled on her ear slightly, “Don’t forget that we have an appointment tonight.”

Ginny grinned back, “I’ll see you at lunch, Mr. Potter.”

The rest of the day passed quickly and five o’clock found the Gryffindor Quidditch team entering the changing rooms to prepare for practice. Harry came out of the captain’s office and smiled, “Team, this is our final practice before the game. I think that we need to have a little bit of fun.”

The rest of the team looked at Harry in amazement. Ron was the first to find his voice, “Are you serious, Harry?”

Harry nodded, “Yes. We’re going to go out there and have some fun. No practicing for Quidditch. Let’s just go and ride for the pleasure of it.” Harry jumped onto his broom and flew out the doors onto the pitch.

The team followed Harry out onto the pitch to see him flying at breakneck speed around the pitch. They all exchanged glances and then Ginny shrugged at the rest of them. She swung one leg over her broom and took off into the air after Harry. Ron followed quickly and soon enough the entire team was swooping and diving all over the pitch. After about an hour Harry stopped and blew his whistle. The team stopped in mid-air and looked at him.

“Good practice, team. I’m going in. If any of you want to stay out here, we have the pitch booked until dinner. Have fun.” Harry landed with Ginny not far behind. He took her hand and they walked back up to the castle hand in hand.

Ginny asked, “So, are you still planning on doing what we talked about last night?”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, I looked up the stuff I needed to check about the incantation. We’ll wait until the rest of the Gryffindors go to bed, and then we’ll do the spell.”

Ginny arched one eyebrow at him, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Harry shrugged, “Don’t you trust me?”

Ginny shook her head, “Considering the fact that your Dad was a Marauder, no.”

Harry grinned, “Okay, I can see where that would be a problem, but I promise that I’m not up to anything.”

Ginny snorted, “Harry Potter, you are always up to something.”

“Not always. Sometimes I’m asleep.” Harry returned.

“I think that you plot in your sleep, so that doesn’t count.”

Harry protested, “That’s low, Gin. I have never plotted in my sleep.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows, “Never?”

Harry made a see-sawing gesture with his hand, “Almost never.”

The two students laughed as they entered the castle, and headed up to Gryffindor tower to allow Ginny to work on her homework a little before dinner.

Later that night, once all the other Gryffindors had finally made their way up to the dormitories, Harry and Ginny turned to face each other. Harry looked at Ginny and asked, “Are you ready?”

Ginny nodded, “Yeah, I’m ready. What do I do?”

Harry grinned, “Close your eyes and sit still. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Ginny complied and closed her eyes. She heard Harry begin chanting and then she felt the tip of his wand touch her forehead. Suddenly, a wave of knowledge and visions flooded through her mind. She fell out of the chair, gasping.

Harry leaned over and shook her slightly, “Are you okay, Ginny?”

Ginny managed to pry her eyes open and look at Harry, “I’m fine. That was amazing, but I don’t feel like I know anything that I didn’t know before.”

Harry smiled, “You will. When you are asked questions that you know the answers to without knowing how, you’ll see the information that you gained. Since you took it all in so quickly, most of it won’t actually be conscious knowledge until you need it.”

Ginny stood up and almost fell back down. Harry caught her easily and laid her on the couch. “Easy, Gin. You can’t expect to take in that much stuff and not be affected by it physically. I’ll carry you up to bed.”

Ginny nodded, “Okay, Harry.” She yawned widely, and then slipped quickly off to sleep.

Harry shook his head, and then leaned over and brushed his lips across Ginny’s lightly. Next, he picked her up and walked to the stairs to the girl’s dormitories. He pointed his wand at himself under her sleeping form and muttered a spell. He instantly floated off the ground. Then, he made his way up the stairs to her room. A Silencing Charm later, he had Ginny tucked neatly into bed. He pecked her on the lips once more and whispered, “Good night, my love.” and then swept from the room without making another sound.

The remainder of the week was over in a flash and it was time for the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match. The morning of the match, Harry was up at dawn as usual. He went down to the pitch to see how things were going to be. The day appeared as if it was going to be extremely overcast. That was good. It would make visibility poor, and would allow the match to go on longer. Harry had no doubts that the game was in the bag.

He went back up to the castle and joined the rest of the team for breakfast. “I went down to check out the pitch. It’s going to be cloudy, but I think that the rain will probably hold off until later in the afternoon. That means we’re not going to have good visibility, so the match should last for awhile. Everyone knows their job. When we get down there, let’s do them.”

The team met in the changing rooms just before the game and waited for Harry to make a speech. “Alright, team. We need a big one today. Katie, Natalie, Ginny, work some magic. Dean, Seamus, remember to keep the bludgers off of the girls. Hammer Eleanor. I want her slightly shook up. That way I won’t have to worry about the Snitch until we have a pretty good lead built up. Ron, I don’t want you to let them score. The only number I want on your mind is zero. I hate to do this to Hufflepuff, but its our only shot. Slytherin got off easy against Ravenclaw. We won’t. Let’s go.”

The team cheered and walked to the doorway to await their names to be called. Soon they heard Owen calling out the names of the Hufflepuff players. Justin Finch-Fletchley was the new Keeper and captain for the Hufflepuff team. Next it was time for the Gryffindor team to enter the pitch. “I give you your Chasers. Katie Bell! Ginny Weasley! And Natalie McDonald! Your Beaters. Seamus Finnigan! And Dean Thomas! Your Keeper. Ron Weasley! And last, but definitely not least, a boy who needs no introduction anywhere in the wizarding world, your captain and Seeker. Harry Potter!”

Harry emerged onto the pitch amid a storm of cheers. Harry walked out into the center ring to shake hands with Justin. They smiled at each other. Justin leaned in, “Will you take it easy on us, Harry. I’ve got a lot of young ones on the team.”

Harry shook his head, “Sorry, Justin, but as badly as Slytherin trounced Ravenclaw, we need the points. I’m afraid that they will just have to learn the hard way. Look at it like this. They’ll be a whole lot better for it next year.”

Justin nodded, “True. Good luck, Harry.”

Harry smiled, “Same to you, Justin. Let’s fly.”

Madam Hooch released the Bludgers and the Golden Snitch. A moment later, she threw the Quaffle up and blew her whistle allowing the game to begin. Before the echo of the whistle had faded away, Ginny had the Quaffle and was racing for the Hufflepuff goals. Just as she reached the scoring zone though, she swerved left and dropped the Quaffle, where it was immediately grabbed by Natalie, who had been right on her heels. The Keeper swerved to block Ginny, but Natalie put the Quaffle through the right hoop.

Owen yelled out, “McDonald scores. That makes it ten-zero to Gryffindor.” The Gryffindors cheered, while the Hufflepuffs booed.

The game continued in much the same vein for almost an hour. The Hufflepuff chasers led by Justin had managed to get two goals past Ron. The score was now 160-20 and Harry was actively searching for the Snitch at this point. He finally saw it close to the ground, and went tearing after it. He caught it easily with poor Eleanor nowhere to be found. She had been at the other end of the pitch when Harry spotted the Snitch and had not even realized the game was over until it was far too late.

The Gryffindors landed and began celebrating right there. Harry walked up to Eleanor and knelt down in front of her, “Hey, that was some amazing flying out there today.”

Eleanor shook her head, “You’re just being nice.”

Harry smiled easily down at her, “No, I’m not. You were getting hammered by the Bludgers the whole game, and you came out of it without a scratch. That is amazing.”

She sniffed, “You didn’t get a scratch on you either.”

Harry chuckled lightly, “Not today, but if you want to hear about Quidditch injuries, I probably have the Hogwart’s record. In my first game, I had someone curse my broomstick and try to throw me off. Once I finally did catch the Snitch it was in my mouth. The opposing captain had a fit. In a game during my second year, a bludger broke my arm. During my third year, I fell off my Nimbus 2000 and allowed it to be blown away and destroyed by the Whomping Willow tree. I’ve had my fair share of disasters.”

Eleanor was looking at him with widened eyes, “You’ve really been hurt that many times?”

Ginny had quietly walked up behind the two of them and been listening to the conversation. She laughed out loud at this question, “Harry has spent more time in the hospital wing than the rest of Gryffindor combined. His Quidditch injuries don’t cover half of it. He’s been in a fight with a Basilisk, Dementors, Acromantulas, Death Eaters, and the Dark Lord.”

Harry pointed at her, “Don’t forget Hagrid’s Blast-Ended Skrewts.”

Ginny shuddered, “I was trying to push that one out of my mind.”

Harry snickered, “How do you think I feel about being bit by a sixty foot long snake?”

Ginny conceded, “That’s a good point.”

Eleanor looked at Harry in disbelief, “You were bit by a sixty foot long snake?”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, I would have died from it if it hadn’t been for Fawkes.”

“Who’s Fawkes?” asked Eleanor.

Harry grinned, “Fawkes is Professor Dumbledore’s pet phoenix.”

Eleanor nodded, “Oh. Well, thanks. I’m going to go back to the castle, now.”

Harry waved, “Bye, Eleanor.” Then, he turned to Ginny, “Now, Miss Weasley, do you know that it is impolite to spy on your boyfriend when he’s talking to another girl?”

Ginny laughed, “I don’t care if it’s impolite or not. I’m still going to do it. That was really sweet of you, Harry.”

Harry shrugged, “I couldn’t let her go away feeling horrible just because her team lost. She might have given up the game. That would have been horrible. She has got the potential to be a really good seeker. She just doesn’t have the confidence, yet.”

Ginny smiled and entwined her fingers with his, “Come on. Let’s get back up to the tower, before the rest of those idiots demolish it.”

Harry laughed and followed Ginny up to the castle.

20. Dueling Tonks

On Monday, Harry woke early and grinned to himself as he thought about what he had planned for the Dueling Club that evening. He was also grinning about what he had planned for Ginny after dinner as well. The day passed by extremely slowly considering the fact that Harry was anticipating the evening so much. Finally, however, he was walking onto the platform in front of the Dueling Club. He noticed that everyone had their swords and appeared ready.

“Tonight, we are going to change pace just a little. We are going to continue to practice sword and wand combination fighting on Thursdays. On Mondays, we are going to begin working on what to do when you don’t have a wand. Many witches and wizards scoff at physical combat, but the martial arts techniques that are highly prized by Muggles can be quite effective. Never underestimate what someone can do without a wand. Professor Tonks, choose your army while I fix up the platform.”

Tonks looked at him in bewilderment, “What are you talking about? What am I supposed to choose an army for?”

Harry grinned over his shoulder at her as he drew his wand, “To defeat me, of course. Get three volunteers. Your choice.” Harry began conjuring a living room suit including a couch, chair, two end tables, and an ottoman. He then proceeded to drop his wand and kick it under the couch.

Hermione raised her hand, “Harry, what are you doing?”

“Setting the stage. I want this to be like it would if you were attacked in your sitting room.” answered Harry. He turned to Tonks, “Professor, have you chosen your troops yet?”

Tonks hurriedly looked over the students and said, “Mr. Finch-Fletchley, Mr. Longbottom, and Mr. Boot.” The three boys stepped onto the edge of the platform. Tonks looked at Harry, “Well, Mr. Potter, exactly what do you want us to do?”

“Well, choose one of the three boys to be the brute. They will use a sword only. Choose one to be the dueling expert. He will use both sword and wand. Professor Tonks, I want you and the remaining boy to use wands only. Your objective is to either stun me, catch me in a Full Body Bind, or land a blow to my torso or head with one of the practice blades. We are going to pretend that you surprised me and disarmed me. My wand is under the couch, and will remain there unless you allow me to get to it. My objective is to defeat my opponents without being hit. My apologies in advance if I break any bones during this exercise. I have informed Madam Pomfrey to be ready in case of injuries. Whenever the four of you are ready, you may begin.” Harry assumed a defensive stance and waited for the four of them to attack.

Tonks looked over the three boys under her command. “Neville, you will be the dueling expert. Justin, you take the brute job. Terry, you and I will use wands only. Spread out.” Terry dropped his sword off the edge of the platform, while Neville steadied himself, and Justin put his wand back into the pocket of his robes. Tonks cast the first curse at Harry, “Stupefy.”

Harry flipped backwards over the back of the couch as the curse passed over him. He landed behind the couch and leaped toward Justin as Neville sent a Leg Locker curse at him. Terry fired off a stunner as Justin swung his sword at Harry. Harry sidestepped the swing by Justin and slapped the flat of the blade with his hand to knock the sword into the way of the Stunning Spell fired by Terry, and deflected it. Harry snapped a kick into Justin's knee, which caused him to go down. Harry flipped over him, and used Justin's body to block the stunner from Tonks, and the Full Body Bind from Neville. Neville threw his sword at Harry and yelled, "Wingardium Leviosa." He directed the blade right at where Harry had been. Harry dove behind the chair and then launched it at Terry. The chair hit Terry head on, and knocked him off the platform. Harry rolled sideways to dodge two more stunners. Then, he leaped towards the couch and pushed it over so that his wand was exposed. Tonks continued to fire stunners at Harry while Neville retrieved his sword and then chanted, "Accio wand." Harry's wand sailed towards Neville, but it was too little too late. Harry flipped Justin's sword up into his hand and hurled it with pinpoint accuracy at Neville's arm. It knocked his wand from his hand, and Harry's wand dropped to the floor. Harry dove to retrieve it, and rolled up casting a Shield Charm to block the Stunning Spell that was fired by Tonks. Harry spun around and yelled, "Stupefy." The stunner caught Neville right in the chest, and Harry rose to his feet and spun back towards Tonks just in time to dodge the Stunning Spell that she was sending his way. Harry and Tonks began to exchange curses quickly, but it was only a matter of moments before Harry caught Tonks with a Stunning Spell. Harry grinned, and said, "Evervate."

Tonks blinked and then enervated Justin while Harry did the same to Neville. Terry stepped back onto the stage to retrieve his wand. Harry smiled at them all. "You all performed admirably, but you made one major mistake."

Terry Boot looked a little surly, "What was that?"

Harry replied simply, "You underestimated what I was capable of without a wand. Do any of you need to go to Madam Pomfrey?"

Justin winced as he put weight on his leg, "I might. I think you cracked my kneecap or something."

Harry grinned slightly, "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, if you would, escort Mr. Finch-Fletchley to the hospital wing."

Ron and Neville took Justin out of the Dueling room, and headed for Madam Pomfrey and the Hospital Wing.

Harry returned his gaze to the rest of the class once the three boys left the room. "As you can see, weapons are not the only way to win a duel. I want everyone to sit on the floor, and spread their legs like this." He demonstrated. "Now, stretch your arms towards your right ankle like this." Harry continued to take the club through various stretching exercises. At the end of class he stood up and proclaimed, "I expect all of you to perform a rudimentary stretching routine every day." The students groaned. Harry grinned, "If you don't, you'll never be able to keep up with the things that we are going to be doing on Monday nights from now on. Dismissed."

Everyone filed out but Ginny. Once they were gone, Harry looked at her expectantly, "So, are you ready?"

She looked at him quizzically, "Ready for what?"

Harry grinned, "Your training."

"What training?" asked Ginny.

"To be an Animagus."

"Harry, it takes years to become an Animagus." Ginny stated.

Harry chuckled, "I didn't take years. I think that I did it in an afternoon."

Ginny shook her head, "That's you, Harry. Not everyone can do something like that."

Harry nodded, "I agree. Not everyone can. However, you can."

"What are you talking about? There's no way that I can accomplish half the things that you have." shouted Ginny in exasperation.

"That isn't true. You can do anything that I have done thus far. It might take you longer to do it than it has me, but you can accomplish it. The Animagus transformation blueprints are in your head, however. I made sure that I transferred them to you."

Ginny's eyes widened, "You made it so that I can become an Animagus?"

Harry nodded, "Yes. I figured that we would start your training after dinner. It's going to take some hard work," Harry stopped and checked his watch, "for about two hours."

Ginny's jaw dropped. After several moments of impending silence, she finally asked, "Do you really think that I can become an Animagus in a couple of hours?"

"Of course. It might take you a little longer than that if you try to work it out on your own, but with my help it should be a piece of cake. Now, let's go eat so that we can get to work." Harry grabbed Ginny by the hand, and led her from the dueling chamber.

The two sat down at the Gryffindor table for dinner a few minutes later. Neville and Luna were already sitting with Ron and Hermione. Harry started to spoon mashed potatoes onto his plate when he noticed that Professor Dumbledore was absent from the hall. "Hey, have any of you seen Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

The other five shook their heads, and Hermione said, "He hasn't been here since we came in. Neither has Professor McGonagall."

Harry stroked his chin thoughtfully, "I wonder."

Professor McGonagall entered the Great Hall a moment later and strode straight over to the Gryffindor table. "Mr. Potter, I have a message for you from the Headmaster." She handed him the note and swept up towards the staff table without a second glance or another word.

Harry opened the letter. His eyes widened in surprise as he read what the note said.

Harry,

The Aurors have caught a Death Eater trying to infiltrate the ministry. We are questioning him now. I will need to speak with you upon my return to the school. Meet me in my office at eleven o'clock. The password is now Cauldron Cakes.

Dumbledore

Hermione and Ron caught the widening of Harry's eyes as he quickly scanned the note and then set fire to it with his wand. Hermione almost squealed in impatience, "Well, Harry, what did Professor Dumbledore want?"

"He wants me to meet him in his office when he gets back to the school later this evening." Harry answered simply.

Ron asked, "Why?"

Harry replied evasively, "Order business."

Hermione huffed, "So, in other words, you aren't going to tell us."

Harry nodded, "Basically."

Ron looked at Harry and asked quietly, "Don't you trust us?"

Harry sighed, "Yes, Ron, I trust you and Hermione and Neville and Luna and Ginny. I trust all of you with my life. However, I do not see a reason to give you information that the Death Eaters and Voldemort would torture you endlessly to get their hands on."

Ron gulped, "I could take torture."

Harry raised his eyebrows in disbelief, "Have you ever had the Cruciatus Curse cast on you, Ron? Can you withstand the effects of full strength Veritaserum, can you resist the Imperious Curse, have you mastered Occlumency, could you stand and watch a Death Eater torture Hermione without giving them the information that they wanted?"

Ron looked down at his feet, "No." Then, he looked up defiantly, "Can you?"

Harry stared straight into Ron's eyes and said evenly, "Yes."

Ron paled under the steely eyed gaze of the boy in front of him. "You've changed, Harry."

"Yes, Ron, I have. It's impossible to have seen the things that I have, and know the things that I know without experiencing some changes." Harry replied with a note of hardness in his voice.

Hermione asked shakily, "Harry, could you really watch someone torture Ginny or me or Luna or Ron or Neville, and not tell them what they wanted to know?"

"Yes, Hermione, I could. There wouldn't be an alternative." answered Harry wearily.

Hermione said indignantly, "You could tell them what they wanted to know and end it."

Harry shook his head, "You really just don't get how evil some people are, Hermione. If we were in that situation, and I told them what they wanted to know, they would just kill us. After they got what they wanted, we would be of no more use to them, and they would dispose of us just like household garbage. If I didn't give them what they wanted, they would continue to torture us, but at least we would still be alive to try and escape. It would be the only choice that could be made. When the two of you get to where you see that, you will have grown beyond childhood and accepted some true responsibility. This war is for keeps. The losing side won't live to watch the winner celebrate."

Harry finished his dinner quickly and in silence. He refused to speak to any of the other students for the remainder of the dinner. Harry waited until Ginny finished eating and then the two of them left the hall together. They walked through several corridors before Ginny asked, "Where are we going, Harry?"

"Room of Requirement." Harry replied. The two of them reached the corridor and Harry walked back and forth in front of the space of wall thinking of a large room where they would have plenty of space for Ginny to practice her transformation.

The door appeared and the two Gryffindors entered it quickly. Harry locked the door behind him and then looked pointedly at Ginny, "So, how long are you going to wait to ask?"

Ginny shrugged, "I wasn't sure that I should after the speech that you just gave Hermione and Ron."

Harry snorted, "You are already in danger. Voldemort thinks that you hold the key to defeating me. As long as I don't give you that information, then it doesn't hurt for you to have knowledge."

"Are you saying that you know how Voldemort can beat you?"

Harry snorted, "Of course, I know how he can beat me, just as he knows how I can beat him. The first one of us to obtain the knowledge that the other one has is going to win. We both guard that information very carefully, however. None of Voldemort's Death Eaters know his secret, just as none of the members of the Order know mine. That is the way it will remain for the time being."

Ginny nodded, "Okay, I'll bite. Why does Dumbledore want to see you later?"

"They caught a Death Eater. They're questioning him now. Dumbledore wants to speak with me after they have finished interrogating him. I guess he figures that I can try and find out how accurate the information is. Voldemort could very well have infiltrated a spy with false information just to mislead us. I wouldn't put it past the slime ball."

Ginny snickered, "Alright. Enough talking about old, evil wizards. I believe, Mr. Potter, that you are supposed to be teaching me how to transform into an Animagus."

Harry smiled, "To begin, we need to go through some basic exercises. Follow my lead." Harry coached Ginny through altering different parts of her body, ranging from lengthening her fingers to changing the shape of her face.

"Now, comes the hard part. What animal do you want to change into?" asked Harry.

Ginny's face lit up in anticipation, "Do you think that I could become a magical creature like you?"

Harry shrugged, "I don't know. There aren't many who can pull off such a feat. We can try though. Just don't be disappointed if it doesn't work."

Ginny nodded, "I won't. I want to try to become a phoenix."

Harry nodded, "Okay, you have to visualize yourself as a phoenix in your mind. That is the first step. Then, you have to will your body to change into that shape. In much the same you were just controlling the alteration of your body. I'm going to transform into my phoenix form so that you can look at it while you form the picture in your mind." Harry transformed and Ginny was looking down at a magnificent golden phoenix once again.

Ginny formed the picture of a phoenix in her mind and then closed her eyes and began to will her body to change. She felt nothing.

Harry laid a hand on her shoulder, and said gently, "I'm sorry, Ginny. You're going to have to pick a different animal."

Ginny sighed in disappointment, "Well, it was worth a try. I still want to be able to fly. How about a falcon?"

Harry nodded in agreement, "A good choice. Imagine the falcon."

Ginny formed the picture of a falcon soaring through the clouds and then began to will her body to change into that form. After several minutes she opened her eyes to look at what appeared to be a much larger Harry than she remembered. She started to walk towards him when she realized that she was a falcon. She spread her wings and then flew around the room a couple of times. It was tricky trying to use her wings. She landed unsteadily and then transformed back into her human form. "That was amazing. I feel like I just ran around the entire Forbidden Forest, though."

Harry laughed, "It will be the first couple of times that you transform. It becomes much easier, though. Soon enough it will be as second nature as breathing. Come on, I'll help you back to the tower. I am impressed, Miss Weasley."

Ginny smiled back at him, "Let's not go back to the tower, yet. Conjure us a sofa. I think that since I have you all to myself, I'm going to snog you senseless."

Harry grinned, "That I could get used to, but don't you have homework to do?"

Ginny smiled, "Nothing that I have is due tomorrow. I can catch up tomorrow night. I need a bit of a break anyway. I've been pushing too hard anyway."

Harry relented, "Alright, we'll stay here for awhile. Not too long, though. I want you safely tucked into bed by the time that I go to talk to Professor Dumbledore." Harry waved his wand and a sofa appeared in the middle of the room.

The two of them curled up on the couch and lay in each other's arms contentedly for awhile. Ginny finally twisted around and began kissing Harry forcefully. Harry returned the kiss with an equal amount of passion.

21. Conversation with Dumbledore

Sometime later that evening, Harry and Ginny left the Room of Requirement and sneaked through the corridors back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry kissed Ginny in front of the painting of the Fat Lady and murmured, “I’ve got to hurry, love. I’m going to be late meeting Professor Dumbledore.”

Ginny nodded and kissed him once more, “I love you, Harry. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Harry smiled as Ginny turned away and gave the portrait the password. She entered the tower and the portrait closed behind her. Harry transformed into a phoenix and took flight through the castle to arrive at the gargoyles outside Dumbledore’s office just in the nick of time. Harry gave the password to the gargoyles, “Cauldron Cakes.” Then, he walked up the revolving staircase and into Dumbledore’s office.

Dumbledore appeared to have just arrived himself as he was sitting down at his desk, “Ah, perfect timing, Harry. I see that you got my note.”

Harry grinned, “Considering the fact that Professor McGonagall practically threw the note in my lap, it was kind of hard to miss.”

Dumbledore smiled, “Well, enough levity. We need to get down to business.”

Harry nodded, “Which Death Eater did you catch?”

Dumbledore answered, “I don’t believe that you met him. It was a young man by the name of William Smythe. He’s a minor member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Harry continued, “What did you find out from him?”

Dumbledore spoke quickly, “He gave us information concerning an attack by Voldemort.”

“What is he planning on attacking?”

Dumbledore answered plainly, “The Ministry.”

Harry nodded, “It figures. He’s going to try and take out everyone that he can in one fell swoop. We’ll just have to be ready.”

Dumbledore began hesitantly, “I was hoping that perhaps you could try to confirm this information. Maybe even give us a time frame.”

Harry grinned ruefully, “I guess it’s tough not having your spy in Voldemort’s inner circle any more?”

Dumbledore nodded in response, but said nothing.

Harry continued, “Alright. I’ll go peek in Voldemort’s mind.” Harry sat down on the floor with his legs crossed beneath him. He closed his eyes and zoned out.

Dumbledore gasped in astonishment as Harry started to float above the ground.

Harry started probing his way through Voldemort’s mind. The Dark Lord was apparently gleeful about something. The only thing that Harry could discover about his plans was that taking Ginny was the most important thing on his mind. Voldemort apparently still thought that Ginny was the key to defeating Harry. Harry smirked to himself at this. “You just don’t get it, Voldemort.”

Unfortunately for Harry, Voldemort seemed to detect the thought. “Potter.”

“So, you’ve discovered my little power.” Harry projected into Voldemort’s mind.

The rage in Voldemort’s mind began to increase, “I will destroy you, Potter.”

Harry snorted, “I don’t think so, Tom. I’m never going to stop fighting you.”

“You will find it difficult to fight me when you are dead. I’ve failed to kill you before, Potter. I will not do so again. You will die just as your parents did.”

Harry replied with malice dripping from his voice, “You might find that a little difficult to do, Tom. The last time we met, I was still a little boy. The next time we meet, you will be facing a grown wizard that has not the slightest hint of remorse at the idea of killing you and eating your heart after I’m finished.”

“Stop calling me by that name, Potter. I have nothing to do with that filthy Muggle.”

Harry crowed triumphantly, “Face it, Tom. No matter what you claim to the rest of the world, the fact remains that you are nothing more than a half-breed.”

“I am the Heir of Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts’s Four.” shouted Voldemort.

“If he was the greatest, Tom, why was he the one that had to leave while the other three remained here?”

Voldemort’s rage increased farther, “They were cowards and none of them would face him alone.”

Harry laughed, “Face it, Tom. Your precious ancestor was defeated by Gryffindor, just as his Heir will be your undoing. I am the Heir of Godric Gryffindor, and I will be the end of you.”

“We shall see, Potter, we shall see. Now, get out of my mind.” Voldemort shut his mind off to Harry’s probing. Harry shook himself awake and settled back to the floor in Dumbledore’s office. He stood up and sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs before he finally noticed the look on Professor Dumbledore’s face.

“Albus, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

The look on Dumbledore’s face was one of mingled shock, fear, and fury. “Harry, were you just talking to Voldemort?”

Harry nodded, “Unfortunately, my spying days are pretty much up. He discovered my ability. How did you know that I was talking to him?”

Dumbledore paled slightly but continued, “I could hear everything that was said. You were speaking normally, and I could hear Voldemort’s voice echoing through the room.”

Harry shrugged, “I didn’t know that would happen. I’m going to have to watch the connection. If it is getting powerful enough for that, then I’m going to have to guard my mind more carefully from him.”

“Harry, I’m worried about you.”

Harry asked quizzically, “Why?”

“You sounded positively evil while you were talking to Voldemort. I’m worried that perhaps this constant connection to Voldemort is starting to warp your brain.” said Dumbledore with a concerned look on his face.

Harry shook his head, “Don’t worry. I’m not being corrupted by Voldemort. I realize that I have been somewhat temperamental, and I can be a little testy about some things, but I’m still the same person.”

Dumbledore asked quietly, “Are you sure, Harry?”

Harry sighed, “Yes, Professor. I’m sure. The only thing that has changed is my perception of the situation. I realize that I have to make being a Death Eater have consequences. If I don’t hold them responsible for the atrocities that they have committed, who will?”

“Society will hold them responsible. They will go to prison as soon as Voldemort is beaten and captured.” stated Dumbledore firmly.

Harry shook his head, “That’s irrelevant. Most Death Eaters don’t believe that Voldemort will be defeated. They have to have some sort of inhibition that is immediate. Otherwise there will be a whole lot more of them. Several of our recent graduates have already fallen under Voldemort’s sway. As you know, Draco has already taken the Dark Mark even though he is still here at school.”

Dumbledore asked, “Which graduates have taken the Dark Mark?”

Harry replied evenly, “Warrington, Flint, Pucey, and Montague.”

Dumbledore nodded, “We could expect it from those four. All of them had parents who were prominent Death Eaters.”

“We need to get back to business, sir. Did the captured Death Eater shed any light on who the spy in Fudge’s office might be?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, Voldemort is guarding that information carefully. According to the prisoner, none of the Death Eaters know who the spy is.”

Harry snorted, “I find that difficult to believe. There will have to be a go-between of some kind. An official inside Fudge’s office can hardly be sending messages directly to Voldemort. All the post leaving the Ministry and coming in to the Ministry is under inspection by the Aurors and the Department of Mysteries.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened, “How did you know that, Harry?”

Harry grinned, “Voldemort was in a towering temper when they started doing it this summer. He realized it was going to make it much more difficult for him to find out what was going on inside the Ministry. Considering the fact that eleven of his Death Eaters had just been captured by you in the Department of Mysteries, he really needed information.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Well, speaking of information. Did you discover anything while perusing Voldemort’s mind just now?”

Harry shook his head, “The only thing that I managed to figure out is the fact that he is still going to be coming after Ginny. I’d say that the attack on the Ministry is going to be a diversion.”

“A diversion? How so?”

“Voldemort can’t stage an attack to get Ginny. He’s tried a direct attack on me three times since the beginning of the summer. We caught six Death Eaters the first time, ten the second time, and killed three and captured two more in the last attack. His Death Eaters don’t have a very good track record in that respect. He won’t attack himself because he thinks that Ginny knows the way to defeat me. He’s not going to risk exposing himself to me until he finds out what she knows.”

Dumbledore interrupted, “Does Miss Weasley know how to defeat you?”

Harry shook his head, “Of course not. Voldemort just thinks that she does. The Death Eaters are going to have to try subterfuge to get to Ginny. That means a raid on Hogwarts. The only way that will work is if you and I aren’t here, however. So, he will need some way to get the two of us outside the castle at the same time. An attack on the Ministry makes perfect sense. Voldemort knows that the Order will go to help if there is a full scale attack.”

Dumbledore nodded, “We’ll have to stay on the alert. When the attack comes, I will go to the Ministry and leave a few Order members here to aid you.”

Harry shook his head, “There won’t be any need to leave other Order members here. They will be in the Forbidden Forest. I won’t need any help to take them out. As a matter of fact, the Order members would only slow me down in the Forest. I don’t expect there to be more than five or six. He can’t risk too many or they would draw the attention of the centaurs and that is the last thing that he wants to do. Voldemort may be somewhat desperate, but he’s not stupid.”

Dumbledore protested, “Harry, I wouldn’t feel right leaving you to face Death Eaters alone.”

Harry snorted, “You’re going to have to leave me alone to face Voldemort someday. Why not his Death Eaters? I can handle them.”

“Don’t get cocky, Harry. They could get the best of you.”

“Wouldn’t matter, they won’t kill me. Voldemort will want to do that himself.”

Dumbledore sighed, “If they catch you and take you to Voldemort, he can kill you.”

Harry shook his head, “I’m immortal in my phoenix form, Professor. All I have to do is transform if they catch me.”

Dumbledore pointed out another flaw, “They could put an Anti-Animagus Charm on you.”

Harry laughed, “Why would they do that, Albus? They don’t even know that I am an Animagus. Why waste time putting a charm on someone that doesn’t accomplish anything?”

Dumbledore nodded, “I understand that, but I still don’t like leaving the castle undefended.”

“You won’t be leaving the castle undefended. I intend to put the Death Eaters out of commission before they ever get near this castle or my precious Ginny.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he smiled, “Your precious Ginny?”

Harry nodded firmly, “Absolutely. I will kill every one of them before I will let them lay a hand on her.”

“I’m sure that they understand that. The last two Death Eaters that dared to touch Ginny are dead at your hands.” responded Dumbledore dryly.

“I actually didn’t mean to kill them. I just wanted to hurt them really bad.”

“I understand, Harry. There is one last thing that we need to discuss this evening. Cornelius feels that he is being left out of the loop, so he has decided that someone from his office needs to question everyone that was involved in the attack on Hogsmeade. I believe that he has several people talking to the Aurors and townspeople that were involved. He is sending someone up to the school tomorrow evening to question you and your friends. I expect to see Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, and you here at six o’clock tomorrow evening.”

Harry sighed, “Well, I guess that means that I will have to call off Quidditch practice. The team needs to take a week off anyway.”

Dumbledore nodded, “If there is nothing else for us to discuss this evening, I suggest that you head back to the dormitory.” Dumbledore said.

Harry started to get up and leave the office, but then he paused, “Actually, Professor, there is something else. Ginny’s birthday is coming up and I need to order her present. I have to go to Diagon Alley to do it, though. I was wondering if I could have permission to go, tomorrow?”

Dumbledore chuckled, “Under normal circumstances, students aren’t allowed to leave the grounds except on Hogsmeade weekends, but I think that I can make an exception in this case. I will arrange a portkey for your travel to Diagon Alley.”

Harry shook his head, “No need. I can just fly outside the wards and then Apparate to London.”

Dumbledore paused, “Oh! I didn’t know that you could Apparate.”

Harry snorted, “I became an Animagus in one day, and you’re surprised by the fact that I know how to Apparate. Come on.”

“I’m not surprised, I just never thought about you learning to do it since it’s illegal.”

Harry snorted again, “And being an unregistered Animagus isn’t illegal?”

Dumbledore paused, “No, that’s illegal too. I suppose it’s alright then. As long as you register and get your Apparation license after Voldemort is beaten.”

Harry grinned, “At least you’re confident about the idea. I like that.”

Dumbledore changed the subject, “Now that that is settled, what do you intend to get Arthur’s daughter for her birthday.”

Harry shrugged, “Well, Ginny has two more years on the Quidditch team, and she is a very good Chaser. She’s riding Charlie’s old Cleansweep, though. I thought that she might like to have a decent broom for a change.”

Dumbledore smiled, “After the romantic gifts that she received from you for Christmas, something practical would be a good idea. I don’t know that her mother could take the shock of anything like that again.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore with a small smile playing on his face, “I take it Molly said something about the jewelry that I gave Ginny for Christmas.”

Dumbledore nodded, “She most certainly did. She said that you have exquisite taste, which I must agree with after having seen the items in question. She seemed concerned that you were going to end up proposing to her daughter entirely too quickly, however.”

Harry snickered, “She made that abundantly clear to me at the last Order meeting when I blurted out something about it. I don’t plan on proposing until the end of next year and I have no intention of marrying her until she finishes school.”

“I understand, Harry. Molly does as well. She is just obeying her motherly instincts.”

Harry sighed, “I know. It’s a bit annoying sometimes though. She tries to protect everyone just a little too much.”

It was Dumbledore’s turn to snort, “Like you don’t.”

“That’s different though. Molly stifles people when she wants to protect them. I just jump in front of stray curses, and run off and try to get myself killed to protect people.” Harry protested.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement, “True. I must ask you, though, which is less harmful of the two methods?”

“Neither. My way lets me spend a great deal of quality time with Madam Pomfrey, though.” Harry said this with such a straight face that Dumbledore burst out laughing at the young man. “What’s so funny, Professor?”

“Harry, sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to be a student at Hogwarts with you. I’m sure that it would have been an interesting education to say the least.”

Harry shrugged, “If you call getting chased through the Forbidden Forest by Acromantulas, fighting a sixty foot snake that can kill you by looking at you, fighting a troll in a bathroom, nearly receiving the kiss from a group of Dementors on two different occasions, dueling the current Dark Lord, competing in the Triwizard Tournament, having detention with Umbridge and getting the message ‘I will not tell lies’ cut into your hand hundreds of times, and being put on trial for using magic while underage an interesting education, I’m your man.”

Dumbledore chuckled, “I believe that you left out the incident with the flying car and the Whomping Willow tree at the beginning of your second year.”

Harry snorted, “I left out a lot of things. If I stopped to list everything that has happened to me since I started Hogwarts that could be considered dangerous, I would probably be able to fill up three rolls of parchment and turn it in as my Defense Against the Dark Arts homework for the rest of the year and next year as well.”

“True. However, we have digressed from the original subject. I had intended to ask which broomstick model that you intended to purchase for Miss Weasley?”

“I was thinking about getting her a Nimbus 2100. They just came out over the summer. They aren’t as fast as the Firebolt, but they aren’t horribly expensive like it is either. Ginny would kill me if I spent that much money on her.”

Dumbledore smiled, “Well, I believe that is all. I will see you tomorrow evening, Harry.”

Harry nodded as he got up to leave, “Yes, Professor, you will.”

22. Percy, the Death Eater

The next morning Harry and the other four Gryffindors walked down to breakfast together to meet Luna. Harry looked at them all once they had sat down. “Look, guys, while we’re all together, I’ve got to tell you something. Fudge is being a pain and having someone from his office question everyone that had something to do with the attack on Hogsmeade. They’re coming this afternoon, so Dumbledore wants the six of us to be in his office at six o’clock this afternoon for our little question and answer session.”

Ron was the first to protest, “Six o’clock. That means that we’ll have to cancel Quidditch practice.”

Harry nodded, “I know. I’ll see if I can’t book the pitch for Saturday afternoon for a couple of hours. Maybe we can snatch a little time around Slytherin and Ravenclaw. They usually keep the pitch bottled up all day on Saturdays. If not we might practice Sunday afternoon or just take a week off. We’ll have to see later on.”

Ron and Ginny groaned, while Neville and Luna just shrugged off the idea. Hermione, however, was a little more inquisitive, “Do you know who its going to be?”

Harry looked at her as if she were crazy, “What are you talking about?”

Hermione persisted, “Do you know which member of Fudge’s office is going to be questioning us?”

Comprehension dawned on Harry’s face, “I see what you’re getting at. No, it won’t be Umbridge. Not even Fudge is stupid enough to send that woman back to this castle for anything.”

Hermione nodded, “Okay, how about Percy, though?”

Harry shrugged, “Could be. I don’t suppose that would be too bad. Percy is a little stiff necked, but it could be worse.”

Ron shook his head violently, “No, it couldn’t be worse. That prat still hasn’t apologized to Mum and Dad for the stuff he said after the Triwizard Tournament.”

Harry shrugged again, “As proud as Percy is, you could hardly expect him to. He’ll come around eventually, though. You just have to give him time to adjust to the fact that he could actually be wrong about something.”

Ron and Ginny both looked sullen, but nodded in understanding.

Harry jumped up, “Well, let’s get to class. By the way, I have to disappear for a little while this afternoon. I’ll meet all of you in Dumbledore’s office at six though.” He kissed Ginny good-bye and headed off to class with the other sixth year Gryffindors.

Harry almost burst in anticipation throughout the course of the day. He finally completed his Defense Against the Dark Arts class and found an empty classroom, and opened the window. He transformed into a phoenix, and flew to the edge of the grounds where he landed, and transformed back into human form. Then, he walked just outside the influence of the wards and Apparated directly into Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.

Fred and George almost jumped out of their skin when he appeared right in front of them. “Harry!” George exclaimed.

“What are you doing here?” asked Fred.

Harry grinned, “I had to come to Diagon Alley to get Ginny’s birthday present.” George looked Harry over intently, “How did you get here? Did you portkey in?”

“No, silly, I Apparated.”

Fred gawked at him, “You can Apparate?”

Harry sighed, “Do you really have to ask that question? You’ve seen some of my other abilities. Is it really surprising that I can Apparate?”

George shook his head, “No, mate, its just that you make us wonder just what all you can do?”

Harry gave the twins a twisted smile, “As to that, my dear pranksters, you will merely have to wonder.”

Fred and George both laughed. George continued, “So, Harry, is there anything that you need from us?”

Harry shook his head, “Not right now. However, since I know that Dumbledore will give me permission to come to Diagon Alley, I might have to stop in and look over everything one day. You never know when I will stumble on the perfect gift for Snape.”

The twins laughed at this. Fred smirked, “Yeah, I can think of several things that ole Snape would think were absolutely hilarious.” This sent all three of them into fresh rounds of laughter since they all knew that the greasy headed potions master never thought anything was funny.

Harry finally gained control of himself, “Well, I’ve got to hurry. I need to be back at the castle as soon as possible. I’ve got to run to Gringotts.”

George stopped him before he walked out the door, “Oy, Harry. What are you getting our baby sister for her birthday?”

Fred grinned evilly, “It wouldn’t happen to be a ring, would it?”

Harry shook his head, “No, I told your Mum that I wasn’t going to propose until next year and I meant it. You’ll just have to wait and see. I’ll bring it back in here before I go back to Hogwarts.”

The twins waved merrily, “We’ll hold you to that, mate.” they chorused together.

Harry went to Gringotts and rode the roller coaster like trolley down to his vault. He scraped several hundred galleons off the top of the pile into a sack. He rode back up to the main hall and walked down the street to Quality Quidditch Supplies. The clerk bustled up and asked, “May I help you?”

Harry began in a business like voice, “Yes, I need a Nimbus 2100, if you please.”

The clerk eyed him warily, “Those cost two-hundred and eighty galleons.”

Harry returned his stare, “I am well acquainted with the prices of broomsticks. I have a Firebolt of my own.”

The clerk froze, “You own a Firebolt?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, it was a gift from my godfather three years ago.”

The clerk peered at Harry closely, “You’re Harry Potter.”

“Yes, I am. Now, could we please get the broom. I have to return to Hogwarts soon. I don’t mean to be rude, but I am in a slight bit of a hurry.”

The clerk bobbed his head up and down, “Yes, Mr. Potter, right away. Would you like the broomstick wrapped?”

Harry shook his head, “No, just put it in a box. I’ll wrap it myself.”

The clerk bounded off to do as Harry asked, while Harry counted out two-hundred and eighty galleons onto the counter. He stacked the money up in piles of five so that it would be easy enough for the clerk to verify the count when he returned. He brought out the Nimbus 2100 in a box and handed it across the counter to Harry. He quickly glanced over the money that Harry had laid out and saw that it was all there. He scooped the money up and deposited it in the till. “A pleasure to do business with you, Mr. Potter.”

Harry grinned, “You can call me Harry. Thank you.” Harry turned and walked out of the store and headed back down through Diagon Alley to the twins store. They were helping a group of customers when Harry walked in, so he waited until they had finished with the purchases and the customers had left the store.

Fred turned to Harry, “So, is that it, mate?”

Harry nodded, and sat the box on the counter. He pulled the lid off and both of the twins’ jaws dropped open. “Do you think that she’ll like it?”

George looked goggle-eyed at Harry, “Like it? You better hope that you have something soft to land on behind you when you give it to her.”

Fred nodded, “No kidding. She’s going to tackle you. Ginny’s never had a new broomstick.”

“Not to mention that’s a Nimbus. The only thing better is the Firebolt.” George put in.

Harry grinned, “As long as she likes it, I’m not worried.”

Fred looked at Harry appraisingly, “Mate, you do know that Ginny would like anything that you got for her. You didn’t have to spend this much money on her. You already spent a load at Christmas.”

Harry gave Fred a stern look, “I know, but I wanted to get her a broom. I’ve got plenty of money, and I might as well enjoy it. Nobody really knows that I am going to have a lot of time to enjoy it. I might get killed by Voldemort tomorrow for all we know.”

George grabbed Harry by the shoulder and shook him, “Don’t you say things like that. If you died, Ginny would be heartbroken. You can’t leave her. If that’s not enough reason for you to live, then I don’t think I want you as my future brother-in-law.”

Harry smiled at George, “That is plenty of reason for me to live. I’m just realistic enough to acknowledge the possibility. Don’t worry. If Voldemort kills me, I plan on giving him one hell of a fight before I die.”

Fred clapped Harry on the other shoulder, “That’s the spirit, Harry. You’ll win.”

Harry nodded, and put the lid back on the box. “Well, I’ve got to be getting back to Hogwarts. I’m supposed to be in Dumbledore’s office by six, and I need time to get back to the castle and stash this somewhere.”

The twins chorused, “Bye, Harry.”

Harry returned, “See ya.” Then, he Disapparated back to the edge of the Hogwart’s grounds. He ran quickly back up to the castle, and went directly to the kitchens. As soon as he entered, Dobby came running up to him. Before Dobby could speak, however, Harry told him, “Dobby, I’m in a bit of hurry. I’ve got to go and see the Headmaster. I need a place to hide this.” He indicated the box.

Dobby nodded his head, “Dobby will hide it in his quarters, Harry Potter, sir.”

Harry handed the package to Dobby. “Keep it safe, Dobby. That’s Ginny’s birthday present.”

Dobby nodded enthusiastically, “Harry Potter is a great wizard, sir. Dobby is proud to keep his secrets. Miss Wheazy will be surprised.”

Harry grinned, “Thanks, Dobby. By the way, drop all this Harry Potter, sir business. Just call me Harry.”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir.” Dobby answered.

Harry snickered, “You’re hopeless, Dobby. I’ve got to go. I’ll be by to tell you what I’ve got in mind for Ginny’s birthday, later. I’ll need your help to set it up.”

“I’ll be ready, Harry Potter, sir.” Dobby stated with a large smile on his face. “Dobby is always glad to help Harry Potter.”

Harry shook his head ruefully as he left the kitchen and ran for the corridor leading to Dumbledore’s office. When he got there he found Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Hermione, and Percy awaiting him and the Headmaster. Harry immediately sensed something wrong about Percy. While he was attempting to figure out what it was, he asked, “Why haven’t you gone up yet?”

Ginny answered, “We don’t know the password, and besides Dumbledore isn’t up there. Percy told us that Dumbledore had to go speak to Professor McGonagall and that he would meet us in a minute.”

While Ginny was talking, Harry realized what he was sensing from Percy. It was the Dark Mark. The fact that it was so unexpected was the only reason that it took him so long to recognize it. Harry quickly drew his wand and grabbed Ginny, pulling her behind him since she was standing between the two of them. Harry asked Percy pointedly, “So, Percy, was your ambition worth this much? Is it that important to you?”

Ron looked at Harry as if he was crazy, “Harry, what are you talking about? I know he’s a prat for not apologizing to Mum and Dad, but that isn’t really any of your business. That’s between them.”

Harry ignored Ron as though he had not spoken, “Well, Percy, you didn’t answer my question. Was your ambition worth it?”

Percy finally spoke, “Worth what, Potter?” He drew his own wand out and pointed it at Harry.

Harry countered, “Worth knowing that you are going to die serving your master.”

Ginny screamed, “Percy, what are you doing?”

Percy grinned, “What should have been done long ago.”

Harry quickly constructed a shield around Percy and himself. This kept stray curses from hitting any of the others. They began to duel. Percy caught Harry with the Cutting Curse along his left arm, but Harry countered with a Banishing Charm that slammed Percy against the wall of the shield. The other students were screaming at them to stop. Dumbledore saw that there was some kind of commotion going on at the end of the hallway and was running towards them quickly. He was, however, too late to save Percy. Percy landed from the Banishing Charm, and shouted, “Avada Kedavra.” Harry anticipated the move and conjured a mirror in front of the curse. The jet of green light bounced off of the mirror and back to its caster. It hit Percy right in the chest, and Percy fell lifeless to the ground.

Harry dropped the shield only to have Ron tackle him, and begin punching him in the face. Harry twisted underneath him and threw him off. Then, he stunned Ron. Ginny was crying over Percy’s body while Hermione, Neville, and Luna looked on in horror. They all thought that Harry had lost his mind. Dumbledore looked at Harry wearily, thinking back to the conversation that the two of them had had the night before. It was almost too much to bear. Dumbledore really thought that Harry was under control. “Harry, why did you do this?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

Harry answered in the same tone of voice, “You’re looking at Voldemort’s spy from Fudge’s office.”

Dumbledore snapped his gaze down to Percy’s dead body and then back to Harry, “What?”

Harry said, “Ginny, pull up his left sleeve.” Ginny merely continued to cry. Hermione enervated Ron and the two of them fled down the corridor. Harry walked over to Ginny and Percy. Ginny pulled away from him and drew her own wand.

“You stay away from me. You killed my brother.” Ginny turned back to cry over Percy’s body as Harry stepped back.

Harry turned to look at Neville and Luna. “Take her back to Gryffindor tower. Stay with her. I’ll be up with her parents after we have contacted them.” Neville and Luna finally managed to coax Ginny away from Percy and took her down the corridor. Once they were out of sight, Harry leaned over Percy’s body and pulled up his sleeve. Black as midnight was the Dark Mark.

Dumbledore stared at the Mark in horror. “I don’t believe it. Who would have ever thought that Percy would turn?”

Harry shook his head sadly, “I didn’t want to believe it either, but when I saw him I knew. I could sense it. We need to contact Arthur and Molly.”

Dumbledore nodded mutely, as the two of them walked up the stairs into Dumbledore’s office. Harry waved his wand behind him to erect a shield around Percy’s body so that no one could disturb it until the Weasley’s arrived.

Once they entered Dumbledore’s office, they both took armchairs by the fire. Dumbledore looked over at Harry and said, “We need to do something about your arm.”

Harry glanced down at his left arm and saw the blood oozing through his robes. Harry sighed, “I didn’t even notice that he had hit me. I’ll fix it.” Harry tapped his wand to the wounds and it sealed with a pop. Harry continued, “I’ll make sure and let Madam Pomfrey check it for infection after while.

Dumbledore turned from Harry and threw some Floo Powder into the fireplace, and said, “Molly Weasley.”

Molly appeared in the fire, “What is it, Albus? Hello, Harry.”

Harry asked quietly, “Molly, is Arthur home?”

She shook her head, “No, he’s at the Ministry. Why?”

Dumbledore sighed heavily, “You need to contact him, and the two of you need to come to Hogwarts as soon as possible.”

Molly looked worried, “What’s wrong?”

Harry looked down at his feet, “There has been a development. We need to talk to you in person.”

“Tell me now. Are my children okay?” screamed Molly.

Harry raised his eyes to meet Molly’s, “Not all of them.”

Molly was almost frantic, “Which one? Ron or Ginny?”

Dumbledore answered, “Percy.”

Molly went into a wail of tears, “How bad is he hurt?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “Molly, you need to come here. We’ll contact Arthur for you.”

Molly nodded, and disappeared from the fire for a moment, and then she came out of the fireplace and into the office. Dumbledore threw Floo powder into the fire again. “Arthur Weasley.” he called out.

Arthur’s head appeared in the fireplace. “Hello, Albus. Hello, Harry. Molly, what’s wrong?” Arthur’s face changed into an expression of concern.

Dumbledore answered him, “Arthur, something has happened to Percy, I would like you to come here to hear this in person.”

Arthur nodded, “Let me check out, and I’ll be there.” A few moments later Arthur came through the fireplace. He hugged his wife and looked over her shoulder at Dumbledore, “What happened?”

Dumbledore sighed, “I don’t know how to break this to you easily. Percy is dead.”

Molly burst into another wail of tears, and Arthur gulped visibly. “What happened?”

Harry spoke up, “I duelled with him, and he was hit by the Avada Kedavra Curse.”

Arthur’s eyes widened as Molly continued to wail hysterically, “You killed him?”

Harry shook his head, “Not exactly. He cast the Avada Kedavra Curse at me. I just reflected it back at him. I’m sorry, Arthur. I hate that it had to be this way.”

Arthur looked back and forth between Dumbledore and Harry. Both of them refused to meet his eyes. “What are you not telling me? There’s more to this. Harry, why were you dueling with Percy?”

Harry cleared his throat, “Percy had taken the Dark Mark.”

Arthur and Molly both fell to the ground as Molly fainted and Arthur’s legs gave way beneath him. “Are you sure?”

Dumbledore and Harry both nodded without meeting Arthur’s eyes. Harry said, “He was the spy inside Fudge’s office that we have been trying to find.”

“Where is he?”

Dumbledore answered, “Downstairs. Harry encased him in a shield, so that no one could disturb the body until you arrived.”

Arthur roused Molly, and began to lead her down the stairs into the corridor below. Dumbledore and Harry followed without sound. Harry removed the shield as the two parents knelt down over the body of their son. Molly cried softly as she hugged his body. Arthur seemed to be beyond tears. “Do the other children know?”

Harry paled as he answered, “They were standing here when it happened.”

Arthur turned to look at him, “You mean they watched?”

Harry nodded mutely. Dumbledore interrupted, “Arthur, you and Molly need to go to Ginny and Ron. They will need the two of you, now.”

Harry walked over and placed his hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “I will take them up to Gryffindor Tower. That’s where Neville and Luna took Ginny. I don’t know where Ron went. I’ll have to use the Marauder’s Map to find him.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I’ll go and contact Bill and Charlie, after I have St. Mungo’s Medi-wizards come to take the body.”

Harry led Arthur and Molly towards Gryffindor tower, while Dumbledore headed back up the stairs into his office.

Once the three people reached Gryffindor tower, Harry paused before giving the password to the Fat Lady. Arthur looked at Harry, “What’s the matter, Harry?”

Harry motioned towards the common room. “Ron, has already attacked me once over this. If he’s in there, its not likely to be pretty.”

Molly pulled Harry into a hug, “Don’t be silly. You’re part of this family. Come in.”

Harry nodded as he followed Arthur and Molly into the common room. All the students in the room were silent except for the crying that could be heard from the corner. There sat Ginny with Neville and Luna patting her on either shoulder, and murmuring supportively. Harry’s heart almost broke from the pain that he had caused his beloved Ginny.

Ginny looked up to see her parents. She jumped up and ran toward them, “Mum, Dad!” Then, she saw Harry standing beside Molly. She stopped and her face grew cold. “You.” she hissed. As quick as lightning she drew her wand and screamed, “Crucio!”

Harry could have easily blocked the curse, but he allowed it to hit him and he fell to the ground screaming in agony. Neville was the first to recover from his shock enough to draw his own wand and cry out, “Expelliarmus.” Ginny’s wand went flying from her hand and she crumpled to the ground in tears.

Molly ran to Ginny as Arthur knelt beside Harry. Harry lay panting on the floor as if he had just finished running a marathon. “Are you alright, Harry?”

Harry nodded, “I’m okay. She’s stronger than I thought. I’m going to go to the Hospital Wing and get some rest. If you can’t find Ron, there is a piece of blank parchment in the drawer beside my bed. Tap it with your wand and say, ‘I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.’ It will turn into a map of Hogwarts. You will be able to find him with it. When you’re done, tap it with your wand again and say, ‘Mischief managed.’ It will go blank.”

Arthur nodded as Harry got up and walked unsteadily to the portrait hole. Suddenly he felt each one of his arms become supported. He looked to his right and saw Neville, while Luna was on his left. Neville smiled, “Come on, Harry. We’ll get you to Madam Pomfrey. I don’t know if you’re in any condition to deal with Ron if you run into him.”

Harry nodded and leaned on his two friends as they led him from the tower.

Molly sat on the floor and hugged Ginny while the other Gryffindors filed out of the room to give them some privacy. Arthur waited until they were alone and then asked, “Ginny, why did you do that?” Ginny merely continued to cry. Arthur persisted, “You do realize that you just cast the Cruciatus Curse on Harry, don’t you?” Ginny nodded while she continued to cry on Molly’s shoulder. “Why?”

Ginny burst out savagely, “The bastard killed my brother.”

Molly asked quietly, “Would you have rather had Percy kill Harry?”

Ginny nodded her head yes and began to cry again. Arthur hugged his daughter and wife. A few minutes later, Ron and Hermione came into the common room. Ron ran over to his parents and gave each of them a hug. He said, “Don’t worry. I’m going to get him. I’m going to kill Harry for this.”

Before Arthur could even begin to speak, Molly Weasley stood up in a fury and slapped Ron across the face hard enough to knock him to the floor, “Ronald Weasley, if I ever hear a statement like that come from your mouth, again, you better be prepared to pack your bags. You won’t stay in my home with ideas like that.”

Ron protested, “He killed Percy!”

Arthur sighed, “Yes, but Percy had taken the Dark Mark. Harry was right to challenge him. I wish that it hadn’t had to happen, but it is over and there is nothing that we can do about it.”

Ron stalked away from his mother and father. He walked through the portrait hole without another word. Ginny continued to cry and Hermione cried as she watched the family collapse under their grief. Bill and Charlie showed up some time later, and sat in the common room with the rest of their family. Ron did not return to the tower at all that night. Dumbledore showed up sometime during the early hours of the morning to discuss the memorial service for Percy. The Minister had been informed of the circumstances of Percy’s death, however the general public would be told that he was killed by Death Eaters.

After Dumbledore had spoken with the Weasleys, he turned to the unfortunate task of speaking to Harry. He arrived in the hospital to find Harry sitting up in bed. Harry smiled wanly at Dumbledore, “I wondered when you would finally get down here. How are they holding up?”

Dumbledore replied wearily as he drew himself up a chair and sat down, “As well as can be expected. The twins refused to even come to the castle. They said that Percy deserved what he got. They told me to tell you that they didn’t blame you at all. Bill and Charlie were shocked, but agreed that you had no choice. I believe that you spoke to Molly and Arthur. As to Ginny and Ron...” Dumbledore hesitated.

Harry finished, “They want nothing more to do with me. I wouldn’t be surprised if Ron issued a death threat.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, “I believe that he did. Molly slapped him for it, however. As to Miss Weasley..”

Harry held up his hand to interrupt Dumbledore, “I think that the Cruciatus Curse told me enough about how she felt.”

Dumbledore nodded, but asked, “Why didn’t you block the curse?”

Harry shrugged, “I guess I thought it would be better to let her get some of the aggression that she was feeling out. I let her have an outlet to put all the negative things that she was feeling into.”

“Where do you funnel all the negative feelings that you experience, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry replied evenly, “I bottle them up until I have some Death Eaters to take them out on.”

“What happens when you run out of Death Eaters to take out your aggression on?”

Harry shrugged, “I don’t know, but maybe I can have a normal life. I doubt it though. I’ll figure out some kind of training to help me focus. I don’t intend to become as bitter about things as Snape. Now, I believe that I have business to attend to. Where are Fred and George?”

Dumbledore looked bewildered, “At the Burrow, right now.”

“Where are the rest of the Weasleys?”

“In Gryffindor tower.”

“When is the service for Percy going to be?”

“In the morning.”

Harry nodded, “Keep the rest of the Weasleys at Hogwarts for the time being. I’ll be back later.”

Dumbledore stopped Harry as he got out of bed, “Where are you going?”

“To knock some sense into those two. They will be at the service for the rest of the family if nothing else.” answered Harry stonily.

“Are you going to be at the service?”

Harry replied with a sigh, “Considering the fact that Ginny cursed me and Ron has threatened my life, I don’t think that it would be the best of ideas for me to be there. I’ll remain in the hospital wing until Thursday. I’ll sneak up to Gryffindor tower and get some clothes and my books during the service. Madam Pomfrey is used to me being in here. She won’t mind me staying for awhile.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Hurry, then. I think that Arthur and Molly are going to go home with Bill and Charlie at some point in the morning to change at the very least.”

“Don’t worry. It won’t take me long to slap those two around.” Harry transformed into a phoenix and spread his wings to fly out of the castle. Once he reached the edge of the grounds, he landed and Apparated to the Burrow. Harry stalked in to discover Fred and George sitting at the table with a bottle of Ogden’s Old Firewhiskey sitting between them. It was immediately obvious that both of them were drunk. Harry pointed his wand at each of them in turn and said, “Sobreficus.”

Both of them sobered immediately. Fred complained, “What did you do that for, mate?”

George inserted, “Yeah, we were enjoying being drunk.”

Harry looked at both of them sternly, “You had better be glad that the only thing that I did was sober you up. Why aren’t the two of you at Hogwarts with the rest of your family?”

Fred and George both looked sullen, “We didn’t want to have anything else to do with that prat. He brought this on himself. We won’t go to his funeral.”

Harry slammed a fist down onto the table, “The hell with how you feel about Percy or what he did. The rest of your family needs you. If you care about the rest of them at all, then you will be at that funeral service in the morning. I will leave the two of you to think about it. If you get drunk again, I will make you wish that you had a hangover.”

Harry swept from the room as the twins gazed at his back in wonder and alarm.

The next morning during the memorial service, Harry walked up to Gryffindor tower and brought his things down to the hospital wing. Later that evening Ginny finally showed up in the doorway. She stood there and waited for Harry to notice her presence. Harry noticed her but did not look up from the book he was reading. She finally decided to risk speaking, “Harry?”

“Yes?” Harry replied without lifting his gaze from the book.

Ginny gulped, “Can we talk?” Harry didn’t respond, but he did look up from the book and set it aside on the table. Ginny walked over and sat down in the chair beside the bed. “I.. I..”

Harry interrupted, “Spit it out.” There was a hint of coldness in his voice.

Ginny laid her head down on the bed beside him and began to cry. Harry put his hand on the top of her head and stroked her hair soothingly. Ginny finally stopped crying and threw herself onto Harry, “I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I blamed you. Mum and Dad told me about the Dark Mark. I love you so much, Harry. I don’t want to lose you over this.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Ginny protectively, “I once told your brother that you would have to beat me with a stick to get rid of me. While that curse hurt pretty bad, I haven’t seen any sticks, so I guess that you are still stuck with me.”

Ginny sobbed into Harry’s chest until she fell asleep. Harry levitated her onto one of the other beds and tucked the covers around her. He kissed her lightly on the lips and whispered, “Sweet dreams, my love.” Harry got back into his own bed and curled back up with the book that he had been reading prior to Ginny’s entrance.

23. Ron, in Turmoil

The next couple of weeks passed slowly. Ron refused to even make eye contact with Harry, so Hermione refused to speak to him either. Ginny and Harry’s relationship returned to normal and they spent most of their spare time talking with Neville and Luna or practicing on Ginny’s Animagus transformation. The two even went flying together on a couple of occasions.

During the second week of March, Harry had to plan for Ginny’s birthday. It was on Thursday, so Harry plotted with Dobby. After Harry got out of Double Herbology for the afternoon, he made his way up to the kitchens. Dobby sprang forward into Harry and hugged him. “Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is keeping your present for Miss Wheazy safe in his quarters.”

Harry grinned, “Thanks, Dobby. Now, I need your help.”

Dobby nodded, “Anything you is needing Harry Potter, sir.”

Harry leaned over to Dobby, “Okay, Dobby, here’s the plan.” Harry proceeded to explain everything that he had planned for the evening. Dobby took it all in.

“Dobby is taking care of it all, Harry Potter, sir. Miss Wheazy will be surprised.”

Harry patted Dobby on the shoulder, “You’re a great friend, Dobby. I’ve got something for you, too. It’s in my dormitory, so I’ll have to wait till later to give it to you, but I promise that I will bring it by tomorrow.” Harry had purchased Dobby some new socks and a scarf during the last Hogsmeade weekend.

Dobby beamed, “Dobby is proud to serve Harry Potter, sir.”

“I’ve got to go and get ready for the dueling club, so I’ll see you later. I appreciate everything, Dobby.” Harry walked out of the kitchens after giving Dobby a quick hug. Dobby continued to beam as Harry left the kitchen. Next, he immediately set to work.

Once the dueling club was over, Ginny hit Harry in the arm. He rubbed his arm where she had hit him, and asked, “What did I do?”

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” asked Ginny vehemently.

Harry shook his head, “I don’t think so.”

“You haven’t wished me a Happy Birthday all day!” exclaimed Ginny in indignation.

“I didn’t forget. I haven’t said that to you on purpose.” Harry said indifferently.

Ginny was really starting to get mad by this point, “What do you mean? I think that you should have the common courtesy to say Happy Birthday to your girlfriend.”

Harry looked at her, “Is your birthday over yet?”

Ginny eyed him wearily, “No, but what does that mean?”

Harry grinned, “It means that I have something special planned.”

Ginny finally noticed that the two of them were not heading for the Great Hall. “Where are you taking me?”

Harry shrugged, “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Ginny subsided and waited until Harry led her in front of the Room of Requirement. He walked back and forth in front of the stretch of wall until the door appeared. He opened it and motioned for Ginny to precede him into the room. She gave him a look that said plainly that this better be good. She walked into the room and gasped in surprise. The room was laid out with a small dinner table set for two with flowers. The meal was set and ready. There was a quaint fireplace and a sofa sitting in front of it. Ginny turned to Harry with a smile on her face, “How did you set this up?”

Harry smiled mysteriously, “I have my ways. Would you care to dine with me, Miss Weasley?”

Ginny executed a mock curtsy, “I would be honored, Mr. Potter.”

Harry pulled out her chair for her, and then took his own seat. “Pumpkin juice, milady?”

Ginny nodded and laughed, “Harry, I can not believe that you went to this much trouble for my birthday.”

“I didn’t go to much trouble. All I did was think it up. Dobby did all the work. I bought him some new socks and a new scarf for it though. He has been a lot of help to me. I’m going to miss him when we go back to Grimmauld Place this summer.”

Ginny looked confused, “Aren’t you going to use Potter Manor?”

Harry shook his head, “Not yet. Grimmauld Place is much better concealed than Potter Manor. Right now safety is more important than comfort or sentimentality. I plan on moving into Potter Manor as soon as Voldemort is finished. Onto happier matters. A toast is in order.” Harry raised his glass, “To Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup.”

Ginny touched her glass to Harry’s and then sipped her drink. The two of them ate in companionable silence for a while and then they chatted about school and Quidditch for awhile. Once they had finished eating, Ginny stood up, “So, shall we retire to the couch?”

Harry shook his head, “Nope. You haven’t opened your gift yet.”

Ginny protested, “Harry, you didn’t have to get me anything. My Christmas presents were more than enough for several years. You bought me the dress robes, and the jewelry. Its all just too much.”

“Don’t worry. I bought you something practical this time. The twins liked it. They said that you would, too.” said Harry.

Ginny stopped, “The twins know what my birthday present is, and they haven’t told me yet. How long have they known?”

“Several weeks actually. They saw it the day that I went to Diagon Alley to pick it up.”

Ginny looked at Harry appraisingly, “You had to go to Diagon Alley to pick it up? That means that you couldn’t buy it in the village. Where is it? I think that I have a good idea about what it is.”

Harry snorted, “If you have figured out what the present is without any help from anyone, then I’ll start being nice to all the Slytherins. I don’t think that its going to happen. If you’re not surprised by the present, I swear that I will allow Fred and George to use me as a guinea pig for their new products for the entire summer.”

Ginny laughed, “That’s confidence. Where is it?”

Harry chuckled lightly, “It’s behind the couch, my love.”

Ginny ran around the couch and found the box. She quickly ripped the paper from it and pulled the lid off the box. Harry walked over and kneeled on the couch to watch while she was doing this. Once the box was open, Ginny stopped. She stared at the magnificent broomstick that lay in front of her. “Harry?” she croaked.

Harry smiled down at her, “Yes, Ginny. Were you surprised?”

Ginny spun towards him and dove over the back of the couch into his arms and started kissing him repeatedly. “Oh, Harry, I love it. I love you. I’ve never known anyone as wonderful as you. I can’t wait to be your wife.” She stopped when she realized what she had just said. Ginny started to blush and move away from Harry.

Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her back towards him, “Your parents have already had a discussion about that with me, and I have told them that I don’t intend to propose to you until the end of next year.”

Ginny’s face fell when she heard the words ‘don’t intend to propose’, but then her face lit up when she heard ‘until the end of next year.’ She smiled, “Do you really want to marry me?”

Harry nodded, “Yes, and once you finish school and get your N.E.W.T.’s, I intend to make you Mrs. Potter. That is, if you’ll have me.”

Ginny grabbed Harry in a kiss once again, and said, “Harry Potter, was there ever a doubt in your mind?”

Harry was saved from answering by Ginny kissing him again.

During the time that Ron and Hermione had not been talking to Harry, Ron had been spending a great deal of time wandering the corridors alone. He just didn’t know how to handle the situation. Harry had killed his brother, and his mother had gotten mad at him about it. What was worse was the fact that his sister was still dating him. The precious Harry Potter got everything. It wasn’t fair. Ron had been the one to lose a sibling, and the rest of his family thought Harry was some kind of hero. It disgusted him. Since, he couldn’t do anything about it, he wandered. Ron actually took to spending large amounts of time in the Room of Requirement, honing his dueling skills, since he was no longer attending dueling club meetings. Ron knew that one day, there would be no witnesses, and that he would be able to fight the despicable Harry Potter.

On the evening of Ginny’s birthday, Ron left dinner early and decided to go practice in the Room of Requirement. He left Hermione in the Great Hall, and headed upstairs. He concentrated on the room until the door appeared in the wall. Ron walked in to see something that he never expected. Harry and Ginny were laying on a couch kissing. Harry was practically on top of his baby sister. The idea of that bastard touching his sister was too much for Ron to bear. He grabbed Harry by the hair of the head, and yanked him off the couch. Then, he smashed his fist into Harry’s face and began flailing away at him.

Harry warded the blows coolly, while trying to talk some sense into Ron, “What are you doing? Ron, calm down.”

Ginny was screaming from the couch, “Ron, stop it! Stop it!”

Ron was too far gone into his rage to notice what he was doing. He continued to attempt to smash Harry’s face in.

Finally, Harry had had enough, “Ron, I don’t want to do this, but if you don’t calm down, I’m going to have to curse you.”

This only served to infuriate Ron more, “Why don’t you try it? The great famous Harry Potter is threatening me. I’m so terrified.”

Harry dodged a punch and drew his wand from his pocket. Then, he performed a Banishing Charm that sent Ron caroming into the far wall at a rapid speed. He hit the wall with a sickening crunch and fell to the floor unconscious.

Ginny ran over to him, and then looked at Harry, “Is he going to be alright?”

Harry nodded, “Yeah, he’s going to be fine physically. It looks like he might have broken a couple of ribs when he hit the wall, though. We had better get him up to Madam Pomfrey.” Harry waved his wand at Ron’s body, “Mobilicorpus.” Ron floated up to waist level as if he were on a stretcher. Harry directed him out the door, and headed for the hospital wing with Ginny hot on his heels.

24. Hermione, on Rules

After dinner, Hermione decide to go to the library to study, since Ron still wouldn’t say much to her. She was so sick of this. Neither of them had been talking to Harry since the day that Percy died. She wasn’t even sure why she wasn’t talking to Harry. It just seemed as if Ron needed her more and that he wouldn’t have anything to do with her if she spoke to Harry. He wouldn’t talk to Ginny or Neville or Luna either. This entire year seemed to be going wrong. It seemed that Ron and she had spent most of the year being mad at Harry. She just didn’t know what to do. She wanted to be a good girlfriend to Ron, but she wanted to be a good friend to Harry, as well. It just wasn’t fair, why couldn’t everything just be normal? Why couldn’t Ron stop being jealous? Why couldn’t Harry be a normal teenager? She sighed. This wasn’t accomplishing anything.

As she was walking through the corridors on her way to the library she noticed Harry and Ginny floating Ron’s body down a cross corridor. She ran up to them, “What happened?”

Harry answered cryptically, “He’s got some broken ribs, I think. We’re taking him to the hospital wing.”

Hermione followed them and continued to ask how Ron had ended up with broken ribs, but neither of the other two students would answer her. They arrived at the hospital wing, and Harry set Ron gently on one of the beds. Madam Pomfrey bustled over, “What has happened?”

Harry replied evenly, “He slammed into a wall, and I think that he has a couple of broken ribs. I need to go speak with the Headmaster. I believe that he should be down here to check on Mr. Weasley’s condition after we finish speaking.” Harry spoke with such authority that it never occurred to Madam Pomfrey to question him. Harry patted Ginny on the back and walked out of the room.

Once he left, Hermione pestered Ginny to tell her what had happened. Ginny stoically refused to even speak to Hermione until Madam Pomfrey announced that Ron would be fine. “He needs to rest for awhile. I will allow the two of you to wait with him while he sleeps.”

Ginny finally spoke to Hermione, “Since he’s alright, I’m going to leave. You can wait with him.”

Hermione grabbed Ginny by the arm, “Please, Ginny, tell me what happened?”

Ginny shook her head, “Ask the prat over there when he wakes up. I’m sure that he can give you an earful.” Ginny stalked out of the room.

While this was going on, Harry had walked out of the hospital wing and headed for the Headmaster’s office. He gave the password to the gargoyle, “Cauldron Cakes.” Then, he walked up the revolving staircase into Dumbledore’s office. Dumbledore looked at him expectantly. Harry sighed, “I suppose you already know what happened?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “Not entirely. I know that there was some kind of altercation between you and Mr. Weasley. I just don’t know why.”

Harry took a deep breath, “Well, here goes. Ron hasn’t spoken to me since the day that Percy and I duelled. Hermione hasn’t either for that matter. You know what happened with Ginny. Ron, however, has made it clear that he has no intention of forgiving me, and has even went to the point of refusing to speak to anyone that associates with me. I think that is why Hermione isn’t talking to me either. Tonight, I planned a special dinner for Ginny and me since it was her birthday. I had Dobby set us up a table with food in the Room of Requirement. We had dinner and then I gave her the broom that I got her for her birthday. Ron walked in on us shortly after that and caught us kissing. I guess the shock of seeing me kissing his baby sister was too much after everything else that has happened. He attacked me. I tried to talk him into calming down, but it didn’t do any good. I had to curse him to get him to stop. I took him to the hospital wing. I told Madam Pomfrey that you would be down to check on him later. Ginny and Hermione are with him at the moment.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to give you detention for having a private liaison with another student.”

Harry shrugged, "So, what's my detention?"

Dumbledore smiled, "I'm sentencing you to capture the Death Eaters that attempt to infiltrate the school."

Harry looked bewildered, "I was going to do that anyway."

Dumbledore shrugged, "I know."

Harry sighed, "Let me know as soon as the attack against the ministry occurs. If there is nothing else, I suggest you go see Madam Pomfrey about Ron."

Dumbledore rose from his seat, "Yes, I suppose that I should. I think that it would be prudent for you to find young Miss Weasley."

Harry was already heading for the door, "No kidding. She's probably ready to skin me alive for leaving her with Hermione. Ginny's been ready to strangle her and Ron for not talking to me. I've stopped her thus far."

Dumbledore smiled as Harry left the office, "I'm glad that you can still deal with all of this, well. Good luck, Harry." Harry never heard a word as Dumbledore intended and intently set out on his search to find his girlfriend.

Harry found Ginny just outside the hospital wing. "I take it he's okay."

Ginny nodded, "Yes, he's sleeping right now. I had to come outside, because Hermione wouldn't stop asking me questions. She's waiting with him right now."

"Did you tell her what happened?" asked Harry.

Ginny shook her head, "No, I figured that I would wait and let Ron tell her. That way she can fly off the handle at you."

Harry replied snidely, "Gee, thanks."

Ginny shrugged, "At least she'll have to talk to you. Maybe that way you can convince her that what you did was necessary. I don't blame you for what happened with Percy, and neither should they. I wish that it hadn't happened, but it was Percy that chose to follow the path that led to his death. You did nothing wrong, Harry, and they should see that."

Harry sighed, "I guess, but I don't relish the thought of the conversation that I am going to have to have with those two. It's not going to be a pretty confrontation. I would imagine that there will be a tremendous amount of shouting."

Ginny laughed, "I think that you are right. It will be better to get it out in the open, though. I'll just be glad when things get back to normal around here."

Harry snorted, "When have things ever been remotely close to normal around here?"

Ginny laughed even harder, "Good point. I hadn't thought of it that way."

Meanwhile, Ron had finally woken up in the hospital wing. Hermione rushed over to him and asked immediately, "What happened? Harry and Ginny refused to tell me anything."

Ron grumbled, "Harry banished me into a wall."

Hermione appeared to be stunned. Finally she managed to ask, "Why?"

"I caught him and Ginny snogging in the Room of Requirement. So, I attacked him. He fought back."

Hermione turned red with anger, "I can't believe him. He tells us that we aren't grown up enough to be in the Order, and know what's going on, but it's alright for him to break rules and act like a child. I'm going to put a stop to this immediately." She turned and stormed out of the hospital wing, leaving Ron staring after her with his mouth hanging open in shock.

Harry and Ginny watched in amusement as Hermione burst out of the hospital wing and started yelling at Harry, "Harry, I have had it. You keep preaching to us about how we're not ready to handle the adult fighting and the adult situations, but you get to act like a child all you want."

Harry shook his head, "Hermione, you don't have the slightest clue what you're talking about."

Hermione's temper swelled, "I know exactly what I'm talking about. You were out of bounds with a girl and you attacked one of your housemates. I'm giving you detention for the whole of next week."

Harry's expression grew hard, "Shut up, Hermione. First of all, Ron attacked me. I was merely defending myself. Second, the Headmaster has already administered my punishment for being in the Room of Requirement with Ginny, so you don't have the authority to give me detention for anything. As for your inability to cope with the problems, I'm right. You still aren't ready. The fact that you are blowing up at me for this only proves my point. Until you are ready to kill to defend the people you care about, then this is a pointless conversation, because I still intend to tell you nothing."

"WHY NOT?!!" screamed Hermione.

Harry snorted, "I've told you many times. You are not ready. If I told you the things that I know, you would break down and beg me to perform a Memory Charm on you to erase the information that you had. If I told you what I know, the nightmares that would plague you would be more horrific than you can imagine."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" asked Hermione coldly with steel in her eyes.

Harry shook his head, "You still don't get it. Hermione, you understand things with your head, but sometimes you have to follow your heart, and that something that you don't know how to do. When you learn, you can come talk to me about the business of fighting Voldemort."

Hermione sat and stared at Harry with anger and tears brimming in her eyes.

While Hermione and Harry stood with their eyes locked, Dumbledore came running up the corridor. Dumbledore called out, "Harry, it has begun."

Harry jerked his head around to stare at Dumbledore. "How large of an attack is it?"

Dumbledore said, "Voldemort has sent close to a hundred Dementors."

"Upgraded ones?" queried Harry quickly.

Dumbledore nodded, "Unfortunately. I've already dispatched the Order. I'm about to leave myself."

Harry responded as he threw off his cloak, "Good. I'll catch up after I deal with the Death Eaters. Who are you leaving in charge of the school?"

Dumbledore replied, "Minerva is remaining here. Professors Flitwick, Sinistra and Trelawney are staying with her. The rest of the Professors have already left."

Harry looked pointedly at Dumbledore, "Then, I suggest you hurry. They will need your help. I'm going into the forest. That's where the Death Eaters will be."

"Be careful, Harry."

Harry grinned, "Don't worry. I'll see you at the Ministry, later."

Harry turned to Hermione and Ginny. "Both of you, go into the hospital wing and stay there until I get back. If I come back, ask me a question that only I would know the answer to. If I can't answer it immediately. Throw curses as fast as you can throw them." Dumbledore had disappeared up the hall while Harry spoke.

Harry headed off down the hall himself. Ginny called after him, "Harry, where are you going?"

Harry replied over his shoulder, "Hunting." Then, he transformed into a phoenix and took flight.

25. In the Forbidden Forest

Harry flew out the window and out over the Forbidden Forest in search of a sign of the Death Eaters that he knew must be inside the forest, planning their attack. He winged down into the trees and followed the trail that had obviously been left by the Death Eaters.

While he was doing this, Dumbledore had taken a Portkey to the Ministry and found it in utter chaos. The defenders were casting Patroni as fast as they could, and alternating this with trying to erect barriers to impede the Dementors progress. Dumbledore quickly attempted to organize the forces. He found Arthur Weasley and asked, “Have we lost anyone yet?”

Arthur shook his head, “No, so far we’ve been lucky and managed to stay together. I hate to ask this, but why didn’t Harry come with you?”

Dumbledore said, “He’s busy fighting Death Eaters by this point, I’m sure. He’ll be here as soon as possible.”

Arthur fired off another Patronus, while Dumbledore did the same. “What do you mean he’s fighting Death Eaters?”

“Harry discovered that the attack on the Ministry was only going to be a diversion so that several Death Eaters could slip into the castle to take Ginny. Harry went to deal with them first.” answered Dumbledore steadily as he erected a stone wall covering an archway to block the Dementors progress.

Moody limped over, “We need more manpower. We’ve got the damn things blocked off for the time being, but all we can do is play a waiting game. We need reinforcements.”

Dumbledore nodded firmly, “Minerva is alerting the Aurors as fast as she can. I’m sure that they will be arriving as soon as she finds them.”

“What about Potter?” growled Moody. “We could sure use his power.”

“He’ll be here, eventually. He’s dealing with a Death Eater problem back at the castle.” replied Dumbledore.

Moody growled again, “Great, just what we need, more problems.”

While all this was happening, Ginny was shepherding a speechless Hermione back into the hospital wing with Ron and Madam Pomfrey. Once she finally got over her shock, Hermione asked, “Did Harry just turn into a phoenix?”

Ron gaped, but Ginny just answered mildly, “Of course.”

“I thought that was impossible.” said Ron.

Hermione shook her head, “No, Godric Gryffindor could transform into a Griffin. I’m sure other people have become magical animals over the centuries, the records have just been lost or never recorded to begin with. However, it is impossible for someone to have more than one form as an Animagus.”

Ginny snorted, “Don’t you get it yet, Hermione? Harry told you that the word can’t doesn’t apply to him. He meant that nothing was impossible.”

Hermione smiled, “So, you’re saying that Harry can beat Voldemort.”

Ginny slapped Hermione, “Is that all you care about? Harry can save the world. Whoopee. Let’s all celebrate. You still don’t get it. Harry thinks that he is going to die fighting Voldemort.” Ginny finished this statement to the utter consternation of the other two Gryffindors in the room, and then proceeded to burst into tears. Ron and Hermione attempted to comfort her as much as possible, but there was little that they could do to help the distraught girl.

Harry had finally caught up to the Death Eaters. He quickly transformed into his chameleon form and snuck up on them. He could hear their conversation clearly.

“Do you think that enough time has passed for Potter and Dumbledore to be out of the castle yet?” asked one that Harry recognized to be Macnair.

Another Death Eater shook his head, “No, we’ll give it another fifteen minutes. Then, we’ll move out. Crabbe, Goyle, the two of you go ahead towards the castle. You’ll draw the attention of any guards that Dumbledore might have left, and the rest of us will go into the castle to find the Weasley girl.” This one Harry recognized as Avery. That made four that he knew.

Crabbe and Goyle went off to do Avery’s bidding, and Harry moved away from the group of Death Eaters to transform into his panther form. Harry stalked the two Death Eaters as they walked through the forest. Finally, he saw his opportunity. One of the two morons tripped over an exposed root. The other one turned to laugh at his companion. That laugh was the last sound he made, as a full grown panther landed on his back smashing his head into a rock on the ground. His neck snapped with a sharp crack and he was still. The other Death Eater didn’t even have time to scream in panic as the panther leapt at him and shredded his face with its massive paws.

Once he was sure that nothing had been heard, Harry transformed back into human form. He smiled to himself, “Two down. Five to go.” Harry started back towards the other five Death Eaters, who by this point, Harry knew would have already started for the castle. He met two of them in a small clearing. One of them gasped in surprise, and took off running. Harry sent a quick stunning spell that dropped him in his tracks. The other one assumed a dueling stance. Harry raised his wand and smiled mirthlessly at the Death Eater. He asked, “Are you prepared?”

The Death Eater, who turned out to be MacNair answered, “Prepared for what, Potter?”

“Death, of course.” Harry sprang into action and sent a hail of curses at the Death Eater. MacNair managed to dodge or block all of the curses, but he was left without any time to react to the enormous panther that Harry had become. Harry landed on him, crushing his rib cage with his powerful forepaws. MacNair gurgled once and then fell limp underneath Harry.

Harry transformed back into his human form just in time for three more Death Eaters to come running into the clearing. Harry immediately shouted, “Protego.” as three Stunning Spells came sailing at him. They bounced off, and Harry countered with the Killing Curse. “Avada Kedavra.” One of the Death Eaters fell lifeless.

The other two looked on in horror and shock. Avery spoke, “Potter, what are you doing? You killed..” He broke off as Harry smiled at him evilly. Harry sent two more Killing Curses at the remaining Death Eaters. They easily sidestepped the curse, but weren’t remotely fast enough for the Stunning Spells that followed them. Both of the Death Eaters fell to the ground stunned.

Harry looked around at the havoc that he had just caused. He chuckled to himself quietly, “The centaurs won’t like this.”

“No, we do not, Potter.” rang out a stern voice.

Harry looked over to find Bane and Magorian staring at him and the beaten Death Eaters in disgust and contempt. Harry shrugged, “I guess that you’ll have to deal with it though.”

Bane reared, “No, we will not, human. You will leave our forest and not return.”

Harry snorted, “I will do as I please, Bane. There’s nothing that you or any others of your kind can do to stop me.”

Bane appeared as if he were about to attack, but Magorian held out his arm to restrain him, “Hold, Bane. You have read the signs. You know that he speaks the truth. Do you dare to unleash the wrath of the Promised One on our race? You are a fool.”

Bane gestured at Harry, “How do we even know if the Potter boy is the Promised One?”

Magorian pointed to the Death Eaters lying crumpled on the ground, “You saw how easily he defeated them. Can their be any doubt?”

Another centaur came into view, “Magorian is right, Bane. Perhaps it is time that we centaur impart our knowledge onto the humans. Perhaps Firenze was right. We may have judged him too hastily.”

Magorian nodded, “You warned us to hesitate in our judgment, Ronan. I wish that we had listened.”

Harry waved a hand to regain the attention of the centaurs, “This is all very interesting, but I have work to attend to. So, are you going to attack me or not? If you are, hurry up and get it over with so that I can get back to Hogwarts. The Ministry is under attack by Dementors, and they probably need my help. If not, shut up and get out of the way.”

The centaurs turned and rode off into the forest without another word. Harry pointed at the five bodies lying on the ground, and said, “Mobilicorpus.” He led this group of bodies back to Crabbe and Goyle. “Mobilicorpus.” The other two bodies joined the others floating behind him. Harry took off at a run, dragging the bodies along behind him as he headed for the castle.

When he ran in, McGonagall was waiting in the entrance hall with Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, and Trelawney. All of them had their wands drawn and were pointing them at the door. McGonagall gasped when she saw the bodies come zooming in after Harry. He stopped, slightly out of breath in front of her. “Professor McGonagall, the four of you can rest easy. I’ve dealt with the Death Eaters. There isn’t going to be a raid on the castle anymore. Keep the bodies, until Professor Dumbledore and I return. I’ve got to get to the Ministry to help fight the Dementors.”

Flitwick piped up, “Are they dead?”

“Only four of them. Three of them are just stunned. Dumbledore and I will deal with them when we get back.” answered Harry quickly. He looked around, “I need something to turn into a Portkey.” He ripped the Hogwart’s insignia patch off of his robes, and pointed his wand at it, “Portus.” He grinned at the Professor’s, “See you in a bit.” He tapped the patch and instantly disappeared.

Flitwick turned to look at McGonagall, “Minerva, did he just create his own Portkey?”

McGonagall nodded her head, “Yes, Filius, he most certainly did.”

Sinistra spoke up, “Is there no end to what that boy can do?”

McGonagall shook her head, “Apparently not. I would have never dreamed that any child could obtain the power that he has. I don’t think that even Albus could handle him if he ever decided that he wanted to do something.”

Harry appeared in the middle of a battle zone. He spotted Dumbledore, Moody, and Arthur. He loped over to them quickly and asked, “What’s the situation?”

Dawlish walked over, “Not good, Potter. Around a hundred Dementors have us surrounded. There are obviously some Death Eaters out there as well since they have bound the entire place with an Anti-Dissapparation Jinx. How did you get in here?”

Harry answered simply, “Portkey.” He leaned over a barrier and shouted, “Expecto Patronum.” Three silver stags shot out the end of his wand and began battling a group of dementors. “That ought to help for a minute.”

Dumbledore took over, “The problem is that since we can’t Apparate out, we’re stuck here. I don’t have the energy to make enough Portkeys for everyone, and most everyone is so exhausted from being around the Dementors that they can’t make their own.”

Harry sighed, “Well, I had hoped that it wouldn’t come to this, but I guess we don’t have a choice.”

Arthur looked concerned, “Come to what, Harry? What are you planning?”

“I know a spell that will get rid of the Dementors, but it takes quite a bit of power to cast. I’m not for sure if my body is going to stand the magical strain. Especially after fighting those Death Eaters, earlier.”

Moody broke in, “How many were there? Did you beat them?”

“Seven. We’ll discuss that later. Be ready to get me out of here, and back to Madam Pomfrey when I finish casting this spell, Albus. I’ll probably need some regenerative potions as quickly as possible after casting it.”

Albus nodded, “Where did you find this spell, Harry? What is it?”

Harry grinned, “Restricted Section of the library. I found the original spell that Merlin used to combat Dementors that the Patronus Charm was a later derivative of. It’s a whole lot more powerful. Let’s see what Voldemort’s new and improved Dementors do about it.” Harry stood up and climbed on top of one of the barricades that had been erected. Several of the defenders recognized Harry and made way for him. They were eager to see what the Boy-Who-Lived had in store. Maybe he would save the day once again. Harry pointed his wand at the attacking Dementors and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Expectus Patroni Aurum Solidid Obliterate.” A wave of solid gold Patroni in the form of a stag erupted from Harry’s wand. There were dozens of them. They tore into the ranks of Dementors and began shredding them to pieces. The Dementors that managed to escape the fury of the Patronus assault fled from the Ministry just as fast as they could glide.

As soon as the Dementors were out of sight, Harry collapsed to the ground, unconscious. Dumbledore ran over with Arthur and Moody. He quickly created a Portkey. Arthur grabbed Harry up, and placed his finger on the Portkey along with Moody and Dumbledore. Dumbledore turned to Dawlish, “You’re in charge. We’ll send you an update on Harry’s condition as soon as we know. Get the St. Mungo’s staff in here. They’ll be needed.”

Dumbledore tapped the Portkey with his wand and the four wizards disappeared from the Ministry and reappeared in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. Hermione screamed when they appeared right beside her. Ron drew his wand, while Ginny jumped up from the bed where she had been sleeping. Ginny cried out when she saw Harry in Arthur’s arms, “What happened? Is he alright?”

Dumbledore was already in action, “Poppy, we’re going to need some Restorative Potion at the very least.”

Arthur laid Harry down on the nearest bed, while Madam Pomfrey came bustling over with a potion in hand. Arthur restrained Ginny, who was trying desperately to get to Harry, “Ginny, we’ll explain what happened in just a minute. We have to make sure he’s okay first. We’re not for sure.”

After about twenty minutes, Madam Pomfrey smiled, which was an odd thing for her to do in any case. “He’s going to be fine. As best I can tell, there is nothing wrong with him other than complete and utter exhaustion. He’s probably going to sleep for at least a day, but after that I say that he should be just fine. He may be a little weak for a while, but not more than four or five days.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Moody growled, “If he’s going to be asleep for a day, how are we going to find out what happened with those damn Death Eaters?”

Dumbledore shrugged, “We’ll just have to wait for him to wake up, I suppose.”

Ginny had made her way past the adults and sat down on the edge of Harry’s bed. She took his hand in hers and asked, “So, now are you going to tell us what happened?”

Arthur nodded, “Well, Harry obviously fought some Death Eaters before he came to the Ministry to help us.”

Ron broke in, “Why was Harry fighting Death Eaters by himself? Why wasn’t he at the Ministry to begin with?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, “The attack on the Ministry by the Dementors was merely meant to be a diversion. Voldemort had planned for coordinated strikes. He was going to send a team of Death Eaters into the castle while Harry and I were gone to deal with the Dementors. They were supposed to attempt to take Miss Weasley. However, Harry discovered the plan, and as soon as the attack began, he headed out to find the Death Eaters that he knew would be on the grounds. I, and the other teachers left to deal with the Dementors.”

Hermione asked stunned, “You left Harry to fight Death Eaters by himself? How many?”

Ginny snorted, “Death Eaters are no match for Harry. I don’t care how many that maniac sends.”

Moody chuckled, “After what I saw tonight, I’m inclined to agree with you. Potter is amazing.”

Arthur smiled, “I’m going to be proud to call that young man my son-in-law one of these days.”

Ginny blushed scarlet, “Dad.”

The adults in the room chuckled at her embarrassment. Hermione, who was not to be dissuaded, now that she was actually getting information asked, “What happened at the Ministry? How many Dementors attacked?”

Arthur shuddered at the memory, “At least a hundred.”

Ron shrugged, “That shouldn’t have been that much of a problem for the Aurors to defeat with Patroni.”

Hermione snorted, “It would if they were like the ones that we had to fight in Hogsmeade. Were they?”

Moody growled, “If anything, I would say that Voldemort has enhanced them even more than he had. A regular Patronus is almost useless against the things.”

Ron looked bewildered, “Then, how did you beat them?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “We didn’t.” He pointed at Harry, “He did.”

Ginny glanced up from where she had been gazing adoringly at Harry and asked in surprise, “All of them?”

Dumbledore nodded, “All of them. He cast a more advanced Patronus spell that he discovered in the restricted section of the library. The Patroni that he summoned were gold and could do actual damage to Dementors instead of just forcing them to run away. They shredded several of them before the rest fled. Now, I must go and meet with the rest of the staff.” Dumbledore walked out of the room.

Moody slapped Arthur on the shoulder, “You make sure that daughter of yours holds onto that one, Arthur. He may not have red hair, but he’s definitely a keeper.” He laughed gruffly as he followed Dumbledore out the door.

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances as the two of them stared at Harry in awe, considering what they had just heard. Ginny laid down on the bed next to him and wrapped her arms around him. Arthur raised his eyebrows in surprise at his daughter, but didn’t say anything. Then, he grinned and walked out of the room after the other two adult wizards.

Albus went downstairs from the hospital wing to find several of the professors waiting for him in the entrance hall. He saw the bodies laid out on the floor, and muttered under his breath, “Oh dear, what has Harry done?”

Minerva was the first to catch sight of Dumbledore on the stairs, “Albus, thank goodness that you’re here. I’ve been at a loss as to what to do about this.” She motioned with her hand at the Death Eaters lying on the floor. All but one had their masks removed and were laid out in a row.

Dumbledore asked quietly, “Are they all dead?”

McGonagall shook her head, “No. Four of them are. The other three are stunned.”

“Have you identified them?” asked Moody, who had walked up behind Dumbledore.

Snape answered him, “Yes, we have. MacNair, Crabbe, Goyle, and Bridges are the dead ones. Avery, Nott, and Delacroix are the ones that are stunned.”

Moody growled, “So, he didn’t send any of his higher ranking Death Eaters. He expected this rabble to be a match for Potter. He must be losing his touch.”

Snape shook his head, “He expected Potter to go charging off to play the hero at the Ministry. He wasn’t supposed to be here when the Death Eaters attacked.”

Moody snorted, “Potter did one better. He stopped the raid on Hogwarts and still managed to charge off to the Ministry to play the hero. He saved a lot of lives tonight, Severus. Including your own. You would do well to remember that.”

Snape’s eyes burned with fury, but he didn’t reply to Moody as he turned to the Headmaster. “How is Potter?”

The other professors immediately turned their attention to Dumbledore. He smiled, “Harry is going to be fine. He’s just really tired.”

All of the professors breathed sighs of relief, even Snape. McGonagall spoke up, “Well, Albus, what are we going to do about this?”

Dumbledore shrugged, “There isn’t much that we can do at the moment. The Ministry is in chaos right now. Half the Aurors are wounded, and many of the other Ministry officials are suffering from overexposure to Dementors. Voldemort could walk in and take over right now if he knew that Harry was out of commission for the next twenty-four hours.”

Moody growled, “We’ll just have to make sure that he doesn’t find out. I don’t expect that the Dementors are going to be eager to attack after the pounding that they just took.”

Dumbledore nodded, “True. However, we must determine how each of these Death Eaters were killed.”

Professor Flitwick stepped forward and replied, “I have already determined that, Albus. One of them has a broken neck. Another has a crushed rib cage. The third one is a bit gruesome. His face is in tatters. That’s why we put a mask on him. The fourth one was obviously killed by the Killing Curse since there isn’t a mark on his body.”

Albus shook his head, “I was afraid of that. I was hoping that none of them had died from the curse. This is going to complicate things if Cornelius finds out. We need to try and keep this information within the Auror department.” He turned to Arthur and Moody. “The two of you must return to the Ministry. We will call a meeting of the Order as soon as Harry regains consciousness. Try to get Dawlish to come and take the Death Eaters. He should keep things quiet.”

Moody and Arthur nodded before running out the door to head to Hogsmeade, so that they could Apparate back to the Ministry.

The next afternoon, Harry awoke to find himself in the hospital wing with Ginny sitting beside him. He smiled up at her and asked weakly, “Why aren’t you in class?”

“I told Professor Dumbledore that I had no intention of leaving you until you woke up. He excused me from classes for the day instead of trying to argue with me.”

Harry chuckled lightly, “I can imagine that he had no desire to argue with you. I know I don’t like being on the bad end of your temper. Could you go and let him know that I’m awake. The password to his office is Cauldron Cakes. I need to speak with him.”

Ginny leaned down and kissed Harry on the lips and then said, “Alright. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Harry watched Ginny as she sauntered from the room. He smiled at the thought that she had waited with him all night. It was comforting to know that someone cared about him that much.

Ginny returned with Dumbledore several minutes later, and Harry could immediately tell that Dumbledore was upset. There was no smile on his face, no twinkle in his eyes, and the firm set of his jaw told of great tension. “I’m glad to see that you’re awake, Harry.”

Harry nodded, “It’s good to be awake, sir. So, what’s the problem?”

Dumbledore sighed, “Cornelius has found out that one of the four Death Eaters that you killed was finished with the Killing Curse. He is pressing formal charges against you. Until further notice you are suspended and are to remain in the hospital wing under house arrest. There are Aurors standing guard outside the door. I must ask you not to violate this, Harry. The consequences would be severe.”

Harry snorted, “That’s a laugh, Professor. Cornelius thinks that two Aurors can keep me imprisoned. I just fought seven Death Eaters and a hundred Dementors, and he thinks that a couple of Aurors is a force to be reckoned with. That man is such an unconsummated fool it is pathetic.”

Dumbledore raised his hands, “Harry, try to understand. I know that you could easily handle the Aurors, but if you violate the orders placed on you by the ministry, you will become a fugitive. All of the Aurors would begin hunting you.”

Harry laughed even harder. Ginny burst out, “Harry, this isn’t funny. You could be thrown into Azkaban for this.”

Harry snorted, “You have got to be kidding me. Those idiots at the Ministry have pulled some stupid stuff in the past, but very few of them are dumb enough to try to put me away. I will be exonerated easily.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “I don’t know about that, Harry. Cornelius has many friends on the Wizengamot. If he put pressure in the right places, he could force a conviction. They ousted me after all.”

“There’s just a bit of difference between you and I, Professor. They knew that you weren’t truly dangerous. Some of them feared that you would try to take power maybe, but they didn’t think that you would really try to hurt them. On the other hand, you have me. I’ve killed seven Death Eaters thus far, and I’ve always shown a certain disregard for the rules to quote you. They aren’t going to take the chance of alienating me, and forcing me to go over to Voldemort’s side as long as I’m only killing Death Eaters. Cornelius just wants to make as much of a fuss about this as possible, so that after Voldemort is defeated people see me as overbearing like they saw Barty Crouch after the last time. He doesn’t want me to challenge his political power later on. That’s what he’s after.”

Ginny asked meekly, “Harry, would you really go over to Voldemort’s side?”

Harry snorted in contempt, “Of course not. Those idiots on the Wizengamot don’t know that though. And as the saying goes, what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Well, Harry, your trial is going to be on Tuesday. Until then, I’m afraid that you must remain in the hospital wing. Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Lovegood have all expressed concern. I have made arrangements for them to be allowed to visit you. As I’m sure you know, it would take an army to stop Miss Weasley from coming to see you.”

Harry grinned, “Yes, I know.”

26. At the Ministry

The Order of the Phoenix met the night before Harry’s trial. Most of the members were extraordinarily upset. Bill Weasley was the first person to finally ask, “Professor Dumbledore, what do you think Harry’s chances of getting off are?”

Dumbledore sighed, “I really don’t know, Bill. Harry is confident that they wouldn’t dare convict him. However, now that they have added the charge of murdering Percy to the list, I just don’t know.”

Moody inserted, “If Potter isn’t worried, then I’m not going to worry. He’s got something up his sleeve, you mark my words. There isn’t a situation that boy can’t get out of.”

Snape remarked coldly, “I think that you need to realize that Potter is just a boy, Moody. He isn’t a superhero.”

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood up, “I don’t know how the rest of you feel about Harry, but I know this. If Harry is convicted tomorrow, I’ll be one of the first in line to break him out of prison.”

“You don’t know Potter very well if you think that he will need help to break out.” growled Moody.

Tonks grinned, “You’re not kidding. The kid broke through all the enchantments surrounding the Sorcerer’s Stone when he was only eleven. Imagine what he can do now.”

Dumbledore raised his hands, “You don’t have to imagine, Tonks. I have had a discussion with Harry, and he has decided that it is time for the rest of the Order to know of his hidden abilities.”

Tonks leaned forward eagerly, “Let’s hear it.”

“First off, Harry is an Animagus. Some of you are aware of his forms or some of them.”

Snape was the first one to ask, “What do you mean forms?”

Dumbledore smiled, “Harry has three different Animagus forms. He can change into a black panther, a golden phoenix, or a chameleon.”

Snape snapped irritably, “That’s impossible.”

“I assure you that it is not.” Harry’s voice rang out from behind Snape. Several people had noticed that Harry had suddenly appeared behind Snape, but had been too shocked to actually warn him.

McGonagall was the first to recover, “Potter, you are supposed to be in the hospital wing. You have not been given permission by the Ministry to be out. If they catch you..”

Harry interrupted her, “Relax, Professor. I made an illusion of me sleeping in the bed. Ginny is sitting in the hospital wing right now pretending to hold my hand. Those two lummoxes they have guarding the door are terrified of upsetting her, since they know upsetting Ginny is a good way to piss me off. Considering the fact that I still have my wand, they aren’t in any particular hurry to make me mad. I’ll be safely tucked back into my bed before they ever know that I was gone. I expected there to be disbelief at the idea of a wizard having multiple Animagus’ forms, so I decided to come and demonstrate.” Harry proceeded to cycle through all three of his forms.

The gathered witches and wizards gasped. Molly asked gently, “Harry, what else can you do?”

Harry grinned, “Well, it should come as no surprise to anyone that I can Apparate. I made it plainly obvious at the Ministry the other night that I can make my own Portkeys. I can make myself invisible without my cloak now.” Harry went invisible and then returned. “I guess that’s about it.”

Kingsley broke in, “No, that’s not about it. I want to know where you came up with that spell that defeated all those Dementors at the Ministry on Thursday.”

Harry shrugged, “The spell is written in several of the ancient texts of Merlin’s day. As you all should know if you paid attention in History of Magic, the Dementors were originally created by Morgan Le Fay. Merlin was the first wizard to battle them. He was the one that created the original Patronus Spell. However, it was quickly discovered that most witches and wizards didn’t have the magical power or the physical stamina to actually cast the spell. Another group of wizards created a much simpler spell that could drive Dementors away, but not actually harm them. This is what we use as the modern day Patronus Charm.”

Tonks asked, “So what you used was the original Patronus Spell created by Merlin, right?”

“Ten points to whatever house you were in, Nymphadora.” answered Harry cheekily.

The other adults laughed as Tonks turned red and shook a fist at Harry, “I told you not to call me Nymphadora. I’m your professor, now. I should get some kind of respect.”

Harry nodded, “I agree, and I’m always respectful in front of the other students, but I jumped in front of an Explosion Hex for you. I think that I should get some kind of perk for that.”

Arthur leaned over, “You know, Tonks, the man does make a good point. I would tell you to give him a kiss, but I don’t think that my daughter would appreciate that too much.”

Tonks grinned, “I don’t want her mad at me. So, if the idea of me kissing Harry ever comes up again, I’m telling her it was your bloody idea.”

McGonagall coughed disapprovingly of the behavior that they were displaying, but most of the rest of the Order were chuckling or smiling at them. Dumbledore interrupted with his eyes twinkling, “I think that it is time for us to return to serious matters. Harry, do you have a plan for your defense tomorrow?”

“Sure. Fudge is my accuser. He’s also going to be one of my examiners is he not?”

Dumbledore nodded, “Yes. Technically any member of the Wizengamot may ask you a question, but Cornelius, myself, and Madam Bones will do most of the questioning.”

Harry nodded, “Okay, then my defense will be simple. I’m going to really piss Fudge off and scare the hell out of the rest of them. They would be crazy to convict me. If they are that crazy, I’m going to rip the entire courtroom down around their heads.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “Harry, I’m afraid that I can not allow you to do that.”

Harry snorted, “Professor, I have the greatest respect for you, but I wouldn’t suggest that you attempt to stop me from doing anything, tomorrow.”

“Why is that, Harry?” asked Dumbledore, with a glint of steel in his eyes.

“Simple. A duel between the two of us, would tear up a whole lot more than just the courtroom. If you let me do it my way, no one will get hurt. If you try to interfere, then I can’t make any guarantees. The two of us would bring the whole building down. I could just see it. Front page of the Daily Prophet on Wednesday. Headmaster of Hogwarts and the Boy-Who-Lived dueling yesterday at the Ministry of Magic. There is no official count of the number of dead bodies that have been found in the rubble that was once the Ministry of Magic. Voldemort would piss his pants from laughter. His two greatest enemies taken out in one fell swoop. Don’t try to stop me, Professor. You can’t change my mind. If I have to run the war against Voldemort outside the law, I will.”

Dumbledore and Harry locked eyes for several minutes. The other witches and wizards in the room could feel the tension build as the two most powerful wizards on the side of light gathered their magical auras about them in a contest of wills. Dumbledore was the first to break the eye contact and look down at his feet. “Very well, Harry, you win.”

Harry stepped over to Dumbledore and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, “Don’t worry, sir. I only mentioned it as a worst case possible scenario. It won’t come to that. Trust me.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I do, Harry. We all do.”

Moody barked, “Damn right. Some of us here would follow you to the end of the Earth.”

Harry grinned, “Let’s hope that it doesn’t go that far. I’m going to go back to the hospital wing. I’m tired and I will need my strength for tomorrow. Good night all.” Harry suddenly disappeared.

McGonagall looked at Albus, “What just happened, Albus?”

Kingsley nodded, “Yes, I must say that I am rather curious myself.”

Dumbledore sighed, “Harry and I just gathered our magical auras to ourselves in a battle of will. The stronger won.”

Tonks asked breathlessly, “Are you saying that Harry is stronger than you?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “Not yet. His power isn’t quite a match for me yet. However, it is close. His will is much stronger than mine, however.”

Molly asked, “Were we sensing your total power, Albus? It was a little disconcerting.”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, I gave up before it went that far. I didn’t want Harry to draw all his power into himself. I could have overwhelmed him if I had drawn all my power to me, but Harry knew that I wasn’t willing to do that. Just as I knew he was. That was why I had to give in. Had the two of us drawn our full magical auras around us at once, the sight would have been far more than disconcerting, it would have been downright terrifying.”

Snape queried, “Why is that, Albus? Most of us have seen your true power at one time or another.”

Dumbledore nodded, “True. You haven’t seen my power in contest with one nearly equal to it in measure, though. Harry and I combined have the power to rip this entire castle to shreds. That is terrifying.”

McGonagall paled, “Does Potter really have that kind of power?”

“You don’t know the half of it, Minerva. When Harry unlocks his true power, it will be truly unfathomable. I can’t even begin to imagine what he will be capable of doing.”

“What do you mean unlock it?” asked Bill.

“Harry has told me that he can sense the power that the Prophecy spoke of him having. He just can’t touch it. He says that it is as if it is locked behind an invisible door that he can’t open. Until he does, he can’t defeat Voldemort.”

Arthur Weasley sighed, “That child has entirely too much to deal with. I hope that this is over soon or I think that he will crack, and the results of that could be catastrophic. I think that we all need to wish Harry good luck for tomorrow.”

Fred and George spoke up for the first time, “Here, Here.”

Later that night, when Harry returned to the hospital wing. He kissed Ginny good night and told her that he would see her when he got back from the Ministry. Then, he settled himself on his bed. With a little concentration and focus, he was inside Voldemort’s mind.

“Hey, Tom. I hope you’re enjoying yourself. How many of your precious Dementors did I kill anyway?” taunted Harry.

“Potter, I wouldn’t be laughing if I were you. Your precious allies are going to throw you in prison tomorrow for killing my Death Eaters.” laughed Voldemort.

Harry snorted, “You know that is bull. Cornelius and few of his close cohorts may vote against me, but you know that the majority of witches and wizards on the Wizengamot think that as long as I’m only killing the bad guys, that I haven’t truly done anything wrong. I’ll get off easily, tomorrow and you know it, Tom.”

“I’ve told you to stop calling me that, boy. I am going to enjoy killing you and your precious friends.”

Harry laughed out loud, “Like your last attempt to take Ginny from me. That worked great. Remind me, Tom. What was it? Four dead Death Eaters and three more captured. Some dead Dementors. I’m not sure exactly how many, but there were quite a few. The casualties on our side were, wait a second, I remember now, zero. Good try though, Tom. Kudos.”

“Get out of my mind, Potter. I am going to kill you.”

“We’ll see, Tom. We’ll see.” Voldemort shunted enough energy into the connection to shut it off after that statement. Harry laughed quietly to himself as he laid down to prepare to sleep. “That was a lot of fun. I need to do it more often.” mumbled Harry to himself as he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Harry got up and dressed for his hearing. He put on his dress robes that he had had Ginny bring down for him the night before. The Aurors stepped into the hospital wing when it was time for Harry to leave for the Ministry. The lead one held out his hand to Harry, “Mr. Potter, I must ask for your wand.”

Harry laughed, “You can ask all day. That doesn’t mean that I’m going to give it to you.”

“Mr. Potter, I can’t take you before the Wizengamot for a criminal trial without confiscating your wand.” protested the Auror.

Harry plopped back down on his bed, “Good. I didn’t want to go anyway. When Fudge calls to have a fit about me not being present, you can tell him that you refused to bring me to the trial.” Both Aurors drew their wands. Harry snorted in contempt, “I wouldn’t recommend it, gentlemen. I don’t intend to resist. I’ll go docilely, but you aren’t taking my wand.”

“I’m going to contact the Minister and see what he says.” The lead Auror stepped out of the room and went to the nearest fire to contact Cornelius Fudge.

“What is it?” bellowed Fudge when his head appeared in the fire.

The Auror began, “Sir, the prisoner refuses to relinquish his wand.”

“Well, then, take the bloody thing from him.”

The Auror gulped, “That might be a problem. The Potter boy isn’t exactly easy to take out.”

Dumbledore walked into Fudge’s office. “Is there a problem, Cornelius?”

Fudge pulled his head out of the fire, “Yes, there’s a problem. That damn Potter boy refuses to give up his wand.”

Dumbledore shrugged, “You can hardly blame him. He has done nothing, but spend his life fighting against Voldemort and his minions, and all you and your administration has done for the past two years is persecute him for it. I, for one would not test him right now. The young man is perfectly capable of killing your two Auror guards and making a run for it. Do you really want Harry as an enemy?”

Cornelius paled, and then stuck his head back in the fire. “Let the boy keep his wand. Just get him here.”

The Auror nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. He stepped back into the hospital wing, and said, “Mr. Potter, the Minister has given permission for you to keep your wand.”

“Really. I’m amazed. Cornelius might actually be growing a brain, but I somehow doubt it.” Harry walked up to the door and motioned with his hand, “Shall we?” He walked out the door into the corridor, and down to the fireplace to take the Floo into the Ministry.

Harry led the two Aurors from the Floo junction at the Ministry down to the lower courtrooms where he knew that the trial would be held. He walked into the room with his head held high. He sat down in the chair before the assembled members of the Wizengamot, and the shackles attached themselves around Harry’s wrists and ankles.

Davis Weatherby spoke up in protest, “This is outrageous, Cornelius. There is no reason to have the shackles on.”

Fudge cleared his throat noisily, “I beg to differ. The boy has refused to give up his wand to the Aurors that brought him in. Therefore, he must be considered dangerous. I have engaged the shackles to ensure the safety of the members of the Wizengamot.”

Harry laughed, “It’s okay, Davis. I’m not worried about the shackles. As a matter of fact it’s a compliment. I didn’t realize that poor Cornelius was this terrified of me. I find it highly entertaining.”

Fudge’s face grew red with anger, “Let’s get on with this. Interrogators for this session will be myself, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic. Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, “Mr. Potter, do you understand the charges that have been made against you?”

Harry nodded, “Of course.”

Amelia asked the next question, “Do you intend to bring witnesses for your defense?”

“No, madam, I do not. I have no witnesses, since I was alone in the forest at the time. There were a few centaurs that witnessed part of the battle, but I think that it would have been quite difficult to get any of them to appear here in this courtroom.”

“Why is that?” asked Davis Weatherby.

Harry grinned, “I’m not exactly for sure, but I believe that they said something to the effect that Cornelius needs to take a bath more often. Something about not being able to stand the smell.”

Fudge slammed his fist down onto the table as several of the jurors covered their mouths to hide the smiles. It was a well known fact that Fudge enjoyed his rum, and he often smelled of spirits. “I won’t have it.” he thundered. “The boy is attempting to make a mockery of this courtroom.”

Harry responded, “Nothing of the sort. I was asked a direct question and I answered it. I was not expressing an opinion on what you smell like myself. I was merely relating the opinions that I heard voiced by the centaurs that dwell in the Forbidden Forest that surrounds a great deal of Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

Fudge could think of nothing to say to this, so Madam Bones stepped in with the next question. “That was only for one of the incidents with which you have been charged. What about the death of the Junior Aide to the Minister, Percy Weasley?”

Harry replied easily, “The major witnesses to that event were Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Hermione Granger, and Luna Lovegood. As I am sure all of you know, two of those I just mentioned were Percy’s younger siblings. I have no inclination or intention of asking them to relive such a traumatic experience. So, the answer to your question, Madam Bones, remains no.”

Dumbledore jumped in with the next question, “Tell us in your own words what happened on these two occasions.”

Harry nodded, “On the evening that Percy Weasley died, he had come to Hogwarts at the behest of Cornelius Fudge. He was there to question myself and the five previously mentioned students on the events during the attack on Hogsmeade. When I came into contact with Percy, I knew immediately that he was a Death Eater. We had known that there was a spy within Fudge’s office for a short period of time at that point, but we had no idea who. I confronted Percy with his deception and we dueled. He cast the Killing Curse on me, and I conjured a mirror to reflect it back on him. He didn’t dodge fast enough.”

Madam Bones nodded, “Now, tell us about what happened on Thursday evening.”

Harry continued, “It had come to the attention of myself and the Headmaster that Voldemort was planning an attack on the Ministry. We had a reliable source with information that the attack was to be a diversion. The real goal was for a select group of Death Eaters to sneak into Hogwarts and take Ginny Weasley.”

Davis Weatherby interrupted, “Why were they trying to take Arthur’s daughter?”

“That has been Voldemort’s goal since Christmas. He believes that Ginny has information that would prove to be my undoing. He wants her because he believes she is the key to killing me. He’s wrong, of course, but that doesn’t stop him from trying. So, on Thursday evening when news of the attack at the Ministry reached us at Hogwarts, Dumbledore and several of the other professors came to the Ministry to help. I left the castle and went into the Forbidden Forest. I knew that was where the Death Eaters would be waiting. I attacked them, and defeated them. Four of them were killed in the battle, and the other three were stunned.”

Fudge asked quickly, “Did you cast the Killing Curse on one of the Death Eaters?”

“I did.” replied Harry.

Madam Bones asked, “Why?”

“It was seven to one, Madam. I felt that it was necessary to even the odds.”

Fudge put in, “Did you kill all four of the Death Eaters that were dead?”

“I did.” answered Harry simply.

Madam Bones removed her monocle for a moment and pretended to be polishing it, “I find that difficult to believe, Mr. Potter. Three of the Death Eaters were obviously killed by an animal of some kind.”

“They were.”

Madam Bones eyes widened for a moment before she asked, “Would you care to explain that?”

Harry nodded, “Of course. I am unregistered Animagus.”

Fudge sensed a victory here, “Why aren’t you registered?”

“The Headmaster and I both felt that it would be prudent to keep my form a secret so that we could use it against Voldemort.” explained Harry.

Another wizard in the back piped up, “What form do you take, Mr. Potter?”

Harry smiled, “I am a black panther. Perfect for stealth.”

Davis Weatherby stood up, “Well, that settles it. He was outnumbered, and used an Unforgivable Curse on people that were trying to kill him and abduct his girlfriend. No major crime there. Percy Weasley killed himself, basically. No crime there. As for being an Unregistered Animagus, I feel that we should convict Mr. Potter and then abscond punishment in light of the fact that he was correct and it was prudent to keep that information secret. All in favor.” Everyone present raised their hands except Cornelius Fudge.

Fudge stood, “Very well. However, Mr. Potter, do not expect to continue in your blatant disregard for the law. The next time I have you in those shackles, I am going to take your wand and break it before I send you off to prison.”

Harry laughed, “You couldn’t take my wand if you tried, Cornelius.”

“You are restrained by the shackles, Mr. Potter. It would be easy to take your wand from your possession.” stated Fudge.

“Is that so?” asked Harry. He jerked his arms up and out, shattering the shackles that bound his arms in one fluid movement.

Everyone on the panel paled at the idea that Harry could have broken free at any moment. Fudge stammered, “How? How..?”

Harry smiled and bowed to the members of the Wizengamot. Then, he ripped his legs loose from the leg shackles. “I have my ways. I’m heading back to Hogwarts. I’ll see you all at a later date.”

Harry walked outside into the corridor and Apparated to Hogsmeade. He walked into the village, and bought Ginny some flowers. He carried them up to the castle and headed for the Great Hall. He knew that the other students would be coming in for lunch shortly.

When Ginny walked in with Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Luna, she saw Harry and gasped. She ran over to him and grabbed him in a hug. “Careful, Ginny. You’re going to crush the flowers.” admonished Harry.

Ginny looked down at the flowers in Harry’s hand. “Are these for me?” she asked. Harry grinned, “Of course. I saw them as I was walking through the village to the castle. I figured that you needed some flowers.”

Ron looked askance at Harry, and then began to speak, “Look, Harry, we need to talk. I know that Hermione and I have been coming to visit you in the hospital wing the last couple of days, but we still haven’t really talked about what happened.”

Harry waved a friend at Ron, “Don’t worry about it. Its in the past. Let it stay there.”

Ron shook his head, “No, I need to tell you this.”

Harry turned his gaze away from Ginny and said, “Okay. Say what you have to say.”

Ron nodded, “I want to say that I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you throughout this year. I wanted to be involved, and make a difference. I’ve been jealous of you for a long time. I want you to know that I don’t blame you for what happened to Percy. I need to thank you for saving my sister’s life, and my life, and Hermione’s life, and everyone that has ever been around you. You’ve always been willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of others, Harry. I want you to know that I admire that. If you think that I’m too hot-headed to be in on the Order business, then, I respect your decision, and I promise that you won’t hear another word about it from me.”

Hermione nodded, “I guess that I want to say that I’m sorry as well. I feel the same way Ron does. I just hope that you can find it within you to forgive us.”

Harry laughed as he looked at Ginny, “So, what do you think? Its about time they figured it out.”

Ginny nodded, “I told them some things the other day.”

“That’s okay. I think that its about time for them to know the whole story.”

Ron looked puzzled, “What are you talking about?”

Harry locked his gaze on Ron, “You are ready.”

Ron’s eyes widened, “Are you serious?”

Harry nodded, “I’m sure that Professor Dumbledore will want to speak to me later about the occurrences in the Ministry. I want all of you to come to his office with me. There you can ask all the questions that you want. I intend to tell you everything.”

Hermione asked, “What made you decide that we were ready?”

“You did.”

She shook her head, “I don’t get it.”

Harry sighed, “You will soon enough.”

Dumbledore came striding into the Great Hall and walked directly up to Harry at the Gryffindor Table. “Harry, I believe that the two of us need to talk.”

Harry snickered, “Yes, I know. I was just telling the others that you would want to speak to me. I think that it can wait until class is over at the least. I want all of them to be present. It’s time that they knew the whole truth.”

Dumbledore nodded, “If that is your wish. I will be waiting in my office for all of you at four-thirty.”

“Thank you, Professor.” said Harry.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as a smile spread across his face, "Don't mention it, Harry."

Later that evening the five Gryffindors and their lone Ravenclaw companion walked up the revolving staircase into Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore smiled as they entered, "Ah, I'm glad that you have arrived. It is time for us to talk."

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "This is going to be a long afternoon. If you don't mind, Professor, I'd like to get them caught up to date before we discuss the Ministry hearing."

Dumbledore nodded, "How much are we going to tell them?"

Harry shrugged, "Pretty much everything. I guess we need to start with the Prophecy."

Dumbledore removed his Pensieve from the cabinet and sat it on the desk, "Harry, would you like to do the honors, or should I?"

"Go ahead, sir. The memory is first hand when it comes from you."

Dumbledore placed his wand to the side of his hand and drew out a strand of thought. He placed it in the basin and drew it up to be seen. The image of a young Sybill Trelawney emerged and began to speak.

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT ... AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

The vision sank back down into the Pensieve, while the majority of the room sat in shock. Hermione finally said, "I presume that the Prophecy refers to Harry. Is there anyone else that fits the prerequisites?"

Harry nodded and pointed at Neville, who sucked in a long breath and exclaimed, "Me?!!"

"Yes, Neville, you. We were both born on July the 31st. Both of our parents had escaped Voldemort on three occasions. Both of our parents were in the Order of the Phoenix." said Harry.

"Why did You-Know-Who try to kill you and not Neville, then?" asked Ron.

Luna sighed, "It's obvious, isn't it?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened, "How is it obvious, Miss Lovegood? Until Voldemort tried to kill Harry and marked him with the scar, it could have been either of the two children."

Luna shook her head, "No, it couldn't. You-Know-Who would have tried to determine which of the two babies would be more dangerous to him. He was bound to have discovered that Harry was the Heir of Gryffindor. Being the Heir of Slytherin himself, he would see Harry as a much greater threat than Neville."

Dumbledore smiled, "Very perceptive, Miss Lovegood. It has never occurred to me that Voldemort would have known about Harry's lineage at the time. However, it is extraordinarily likely that you are correct."

Hermione pouted for a moment since she wasn't the one to have come up with this information. She recovered quickly, however. "This is why you let Harry into the Order of the Phoenix."

Dumbledore nodded, "Yes, it is. Although it isn't the only reason."

Ron asked, "What else is there?"

Harry grinned, "Well, you know that I am an Animagus."

Ron waved his hand, "We know that you have two forms."

"Three, Ron. A black panther, a golden phoenix, and a chameleon. I also have the ability to tap into Voldemort's mind, and discover things that he knows. This has been cut off lately, since Voldemort discovered that I was doing it."

Comprehension dawned on Hermione's face, "That's why you have been doing everything in class as if you already knew it. You did."

Harry grinned, "Precisely. The connection is how I learned how to sword fight, and its how I learned the Animagus transformation so easily. Now, I have another bombshell for you. I'm not the only Animagus in this room."

Dumbledore's smile faded, "What do you mean, Harry?"

"Show them, Ginny."

Ginny transformed into a falcon, and then flew quickly around the room. She landed beside Harry and then transformed back. Even Dumbledore appeared to be in shock.

Fawkes trilled *My brother, your mate is a most magnificent looking bird. She is also quite talented.*

Harry grinned, "Thanks, Fawkes. I'm sure that she will appreciate the compliment."

Ginny grinned impishly at Harry, "What did he say?"

Harry replied, "He said that you were a magnificent looking bird."

Ginny blushed slightly, "Thank you, Fawkes."

Neville looked confused, "Harry, were you just talking to the phoenix?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, Neville, I was."

"I thought that was supposed to be impossible." chimed in Luna.

"Technically it is. However, since my Animagus form is a phoenix, I can understand his trilling." answered Harry.

Hermione asked, "What about this power that the Dark Lord knows not business in the Prophecy? Is that why you are so strong at such an early age?"

Harry shook his head, "No. The power that the Prophecy speaks of is locked away. I don't know how to release it."

Ron gulped, "Do you need that power to defeat You-Know-Who?"

Harry sighed and then nodded, "Yes, Ron, I do."

"What happens if you don't unlock the power?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged, "I die."

Ron placed his head into his hands, "Damn, and to think that I have been jealous of you. Bloody Hell!"

Hermione patted his back, "Are there anymore surprises?"

Harry shook his head, "I don't suppose. I guess all that remains is to discuss the trial from this morning."

Neville leaned forward, "Yeah, what happened? It's obvious that you got off, but I don't even know what you were being put on trial for?"

Harry began, "Last Thursday night, the Ministry was attacked by a force of about one hundred of Voldemort's enhanced Dementors. The attack was a diversion for a group of Death Eaters to sneak into the castle, and kidnap Ginny. I knew about it ahead of time, so I went into the Forbidden Forest to deal with them before going to the Ministry. I killed four of them, and captured three more. I was forced to kill one of them with the Killing Curse, and that was what Fudge pressed charges against me for."

Hermione asked, “Were you acquitted of all charges?”

Dumbledore shook his head, “No, he wasn’t. Mr. Potter was found guilty of being an Unregistered Animagus and then given time off for the prudence of keeping such information a secret given the knowledge of spies within the Ministry.”

Ron looked at Harry, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Harry grinned, “No, Ron, its not a joke. Now, Professor, if there is nothing else that we need to discuss, Gryffindor has the Quidditch pitch booked until seven, and I wouldn’t mind getting some flying in before dinner.”

“One last thing, Harry. How did you break the shackles?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry grinned, “I cast a Transfiguration spell to alter the molecular density of the metal to that of glass. The physical strength of the shackles was then quite easy to overcome.”

Dumbledore chuckled, “Those shackles are protected from just about every type of enchantment that the creators could think of. They must not have thought of that one.”

27. The Quidditch Cup

The next several weeks flew by. Slytherin obliterated Hufflepuff to land themselves with a solid second place standing in the Quidditch Cup. Gryffindor needed to score at least 210 points in their match against Ravenclaw to claim the Cup. The intervening weeks were a combination of homework, dueling club practice, and Quidditch practice. Harry was drilling the team hard, and was also putting the student body through their paces in the dueling club as well. There was little else to distract them. After the major attack on the Ministry, there had been no sign of Death Eater activity. Voldemort had been blocking off his connection to Harry with an almost reckless determination. Harry began to worry. He decided that he needed to discuss the situation with Dumbledore.

The week of the Quidditch Final, Harry walked up to Dumbledore’s office. He gave the gargoyle the password, “Chocolate Humbugs.” The password had been changed once again. Harry entered the office quietly to find Dumbledore writing a note. He looked up after a moment, “Hello, Harry, what can I do for you?”

“Albus, Voldemort is beginning to worry me.” began Harry.

“How so, Harry?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry shrugged, “It has been too long since he has tried to do anything. He hasn’t attacked anyone to our knowledge since the battle at the Ministry. He’s keeping the connection between us closed off at all costs. That means that he is planning something big. The only thing that I can think of that would matter this much to his plans is an attack on Hogwarts itself.”

Dumbledore nodded, “I quite agree, Harry. However, Voldemort would have to be desperate indeed to actually attack the castle.”

“He’s there, Professor. He knows that I am getting more powerful by the day. The longer he waits, the greater chance he has of losing. His only prayer is to attack the castle, and hope that he gets lucky.” answered Harry.

“We must merely make sure that one of us is at the castle at all times.” stated Dumbledore. “He will hesitate to attack if one of us is here.”

Harry shook his head, “No, Professor. He will hesitate to attack if both of us are here. If one of us leaves the castle and he finds out about it, that’s when he will make his move. We are going to have to cover our comings and goings very carefully. We need to maintain the illusion that both of us are in the castle at all times. I wouldn’t mind having a few Aurors at the castle during the Quidditch final either. That would be the perfect time to attack. All of the students would be exposed.”

“I understand. I will speak to Dawlish about some extra security at the castle during the match. Hopefully, Voldemort will hold off until after that.” said Dumbledore.

“I’m going to head down to the dueling room. I guess the club should be assembled by now.” Harry said as he got up and started for the door.

He stopped when he heard Dumbledore’s voice ring out behind him, “Good luck in the Quidditch final, Mr. Potter. I will be cheering for Gryffindor.”

Harry grinned, “I thought you were supposed to be impartial.”

Dumbledore shrugged, “I’ll do it quietly.”

Harry laughed about this all the way down to the dueling room. He jumped up onto the platform. “This is going to be the last dueling club meeting of the year.” Several protests and groans were heard throughout the hall. “I feel that it is going to be necessary for all of you to spend your extra time studying for the end of the year exams. Especially the fifth and seventh years, who are about to take their O.W.L.’s and N.E.W.T.’s respectively. We are going to try something a little different tonight. We have always dueled under ideal circumstances. Tonight, we are going to change that.” Harry waved his wand, and the lights went out. “Let’s see how well you defend yourselves. Tonks and I will be roving throughout the room attacking you. Be ready.”

This was some lively entertainment for about an hour. Harry spent about thirty minutes afterward doing counter-curses, and then he shouted, "Dismissed. I will see you next year in the dueling club."

The students filed out and Harry walked Ginny back to Gryffindor tower. The evening passed, and then the next day dawned. After they survived the classes for the day, it was time for Quidditch practice. Harry strode out of the captain's office, "Alright, guys, here's the situation. After the way Slytherin trounced Hufflepuff, we are going to need 210 points to take the Quidditch Cup. Ravenclaw needs 390. In other words, they're out of the running unless we have a really long game and they get the Snitch. So, we don't have to really worry about their Chasers. We need to watch our own score and the Snitch. If Ravenclaw gets the Snitch or forces me to catch it too soon, Slytherin will take the Cup."

Dean piped up, "I take it that's where we come in."

Harry nodded, "I want you to hammer Cho Chang the same way you did Eleanor. Its going to be a lot more work for you this time around. Cho is an excellent seeker, and she won't be intimidated as easily as Eleanor was. You need to keep her off the Snitch long enough for Katie, Natalie, and Ginny to get at least six goals. That shouldn't be that hard considering how good they are. Ron, I'm afraid we're going to have to hang you out to dry. You'll have to take the Chasers one on one for the most part. You can handle it, though."

Ron smirked, "I did fine against Ravenclaw last year. I'll be fine on Saturday as well."

Harry grinned, "That's the spirit. Let's get to the pitch." The team ran out onto the pitch and then took to the air. The practice was excellent. Harry was beaming with pleasure as he reentered the changing rooms to get back into his Hogwarts's robes. He headed up to the school with the rest of the team.

Harry spent the rest of the week either in class or helping Ginny with her homework. Harry woke up early on Saturday morning, as usual. He was ready for the match. It was time to claim his legacy as Captain of the Gryffindor team. The Quidditch Cup would be theirs for the third time in a row. A win here would guarantee the House Cup for Gryffindor. That would make five out of six years. Harry walked around the pitch and breathed in the fresh air. He walked back up to the castle to meet the team for the match.

Later that day, the Quidditch team was standing around in the changing room waiting for the match to begin. Harry looked over at Ron, "I want you to take over as captain next year."

Ron turned to look at him as if he were crazy, "What are you talking about?"

Harry smiled, "I want you to take over next year. If we win the Quidditch Cup with me as captain then I will have accomplished everything that I wanted to while I was at Hogwarts. It will be time for me to turn over the reins. It will be for you to lead the team to victory next year."

Ron shook his head, "You're crazy, Harry."

"No, I'm not. Now, let's go." The rest of the team lined up behind Harry and Ron and they looped out to the sound of their names being called.

"This is Owen Cauldwell. Here is the Gryffindor team. We have your keeper, Ron Weasley. Your Chasers, Katie Bell, Ginny Weasley, and Natalie McDonald. Your Beaters, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. Last but definitely not least, your captain and seeker, Harry Potter."

The team swooped around and Harry landed in the center ring. Madam Hooch walked up to Harry as did Cho Chang. "Captains shake hands."

Harry and Cho shook hands. "Good luck, Harry."

Harry nodded, "You too."

The two teams took to the air. Madam Hooch released the Bludgers and the Snitch. A moment later she threw the Quaffle up into the air and the game began. Ginny was the first to grab the Quaffle. The game was intense. The two teams battled it out on the pitch for close to an hour. The game was close. Gryffindor led 90-80, when Harry caught a glimpse of the Snitch. He was on the thing as fast as possible. Cho was too far out of position to compete with Harry for the Snitch, but she tried nonetheless. Seamus sent a Bludger her way for good measure. Harry caught the Snitch on a sweeping dive, when the Bludger that Seamus hit caught Cho in the side, and knocked Cho off her broom. Harry saw her out of the corner of his eye, and he let go of the Snitch to go racing after her just as Owen Cauldwell was announcing that Gryffindor had won the match with a score of 240-80.

Harry caught Cho inches from the ground. He landed while still holding her in his arms. She clasped him tightly as she sobbed from the terror of the experience. She grabbed Harry and planted a kiss right on his lips. Harry tensed immediately and pushed her away. One of the Ravenclaw girls came up and led Cho away. Harry looked over to Ginny to find her staring at him with a hard look on her face. Harry accepted the Quidditch Cup and held it up for the team to see. They passed it around while the Gryffindors cheered around them.

A few minutes later, Ginny stalked away from the group and Harry was forced to run to catch up with her. He laid a hand on her arm to attempt to stop her, but she jerked her arm away from him and drew her wand. She pointed it at Harry, "Just stay away from me, Harry. I saw you kiss her."

"First of all, I didn't kiss Cho, she kissed me. Second of all, if you paid any attention whatsoever, I pushed her away as soon as I could. However, if you think that I would betray you like that, maybe you should just keep walking," responded Harry coldly.

Ginny opened her mouth to say something, but no words would come out. She finally just burst into tears and threw herself onto Harry. He pulled her close to him and whispered, "I love you, Ginny, and I will always be here for you."

"I know," she sobbed. "It's just that I get jealous when I see you with other girls."

Harry smiled as he asked, "Why?"

"I'm afraid that they might steal you from me." Ginny pouted.

Harry snorted, "You've got to be kidding me. I already have the most beautiful, most talented, most wonderful, kindest, gentlest, and most interesting female at Hogwarts wrapped in my arms. Why would I ever want anyone else?"

Ginny smiled, "Oh, Harry, I love you."

28. The Attack

The last few weeks of school passed quickly. Ginny was starting to fold under the pressure of the O.W.L.'s. The night before the tests began found Ginny studying furiously. Harry was standing behind her massaging her shoulders and telling her to relax. She snapped at him repeatedly to shut up. Harry merely grinned. Finally, he decided to put an end to it. "Alright, Ginny, its time to stop."

She shook her head stubbornly, "I can't, Harry. I have to do well on this test."

"You're going to do fine, Ginny. You know this information standing on your head. The best thing for you to do is relax and then get a good night's sleep. That way you will be alert tomorrow."

"But, Harry.." began Ginny.

Harry cut her off immediately, "Don't but Harry, me. I forbid you to study anymore."

Ginny put a defiant expression on her face, "Oh, you forbid me, do you?"

Harry drew his wand and pointed at her, "That's right. I forbid you. You're going to relax if I have to hex you."

Ginny made a mock fearful face, "You wouldn't curse me, would you?"

"Would you have cursed me that day that Cho kissed me?" asked Harry.

Ginny nodded, "Probably. I'm not for sure, though."

"Well, I'm a hundred times more serious about this than you were that day." responded Harry.

Ginny's eyes widened, "Okay. I'll stop studying and relax."

Harry grinned triumphantly, "Good. Now, come over to the couch and relax in my arms."

The two teenagers walked over to the couch where Harry laid down and stretched out. Ginny laid down beside him and he wrapped his arms around her. Ginny snuggled back into him and smiled, "I should have listened to you earlier. I could get used to this."

Harry smiled as he leaned in and nuzzled Ginny's ear, "You better get used to this. We are going to be spending evenings lying in front of the fire for years to come."

"Mr. Potter, you're going to have to put a ring on my finger if you want me to stay with you for that long." exclaimed Ginny in mock disbelief.

Harry chuckled as he pulled Ginny closer to him, "When the time is right, I intend to, Miss Weasley.

The next morning Harry met Professor Dumbledore in the corridor. He smiled, "Ah, just the person I was looking for."

Dumbledore smiled, "And why is that, Harry?"

"Well, the Gryffindors have been working really hard studying for their exams. I think that they need a party to unwind after they get through with the tests. So, I was going to ask your permission to go down to the village on the last day of exams. That way I can get some things for us to have a party with that night. I know none of them will party until the last day of the O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s."

Dumbledore nodded, "I think that it is an excellent idea, Harry."

"So, that means I can go next Friday, right?" asked Harry.

"Of course. Just don't be out of the castle for too long. We don't want to give Voldemort much of a window where we aren't both in the castle." answered Dumbledore.

Harry grinned, "I somehow doubt he'll even find out that I've left the castle before I get back. I'll go through one of the hidden passages to make sure that I'm not seen leaving the castle."

Dumbledore patted Harry on the back, "Don't worry. I'm sure that I can handle things till you get back. Enjoy."

"Well, I'm going to get to class. Professor McGonagall will skin me alive if I'm late." said Harry as he took off down the corridor.

After Dumbledore and Harry disappeared from sight around opposite corners, Draco Malfoy stepped out of a nearby classroom and smiled evilly to himself. He went immediately to the Slytherin dungeon. Once he was in his dormitory and alone, he pulled out a mirror similar to the one that Harry gave Ginny. "Father."

Lucius Malfoy's face appeared in the mirror. "What is it, Draco?"

"Father, Potter will be leaving the castle to go into the village on Friday afternoon after his last exam." answered Draco.

Lucius' face lit up, "How do you know this?"

Draco smiled, "I overheard him asking that fool of a Headmaster for permission to go."

"Were you seen?" asked Lucius sharply.

"No, Father. I was hidden in a classroom off the hall. They didn't know that I was present." answered Draco.

Lucius grinned with malice in his eyes, "Excellent. The Dark Lord will reward you well for this information, Draco. You are well on your way up the ranks of the Death Eaters."

Draco inclined his head, "I live only to serve the Dark Lord."

Lucius broke the connection with Draco and Apparated to the chamber of Voldemort. He knocked on the door and bowed, waiting to be acknowledged. "Rise, Lucius."

"Yes, Master." Lucius rose to his feet and walked into the room.

"What information do you have for me?" asked Voldemort.

"My Lord, Draco has reported to me that Potter will be leaving the castle next Friday to go to the village." said Lucius.

"How did he come by this information?"

Lucius smiled, "He was eavesdropping from an empty classroom while Potter was asking Dumbledore for permission to go."

Voldemort placed his hands together in front of him, and began tapping his fingers against each other, "This is excellent news. Lucius, inform the rest of the Death Eaters that we will commence the attack on the castle on Friday week. Assemble the giants as well."

Lucius bowed, "Yes, My Lord." He turned and swept out of the room.

Voldemort clasped his hands together with glee, "Victory will be mine."

The two weeks of exams went by in a blur and before Harry knew it, it was the final day of exams. The four sixth year Gryffindors got out of their last exam which was Charms, and breathed a sigh of relief. Hermione smiled brightly, "Let's all go down to the lake until the fifth years finish with their O.W.L.'s."

Ron and Neville both nodded, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

Harry shook his head, "Sorry, guys, you'll have to go without me. I've got something that I have to go do. I'll catch up with you later." He turned and headed down a different corridor.

Ron hollered after him, "What are you going to do?"

Harry yelled back, "It's a surprise. Tell Ginny that I'll see her later."

Hermione turned to look at Ron, "I wonder what he's up to."

Ron shrugged, "I don't know."

Neville grinned, "He told us that it was a surprise. I guess we'll find out soon enough."

Ron grinned back, "I just hope its good. Let's go to the lake. I need some good rest and relaxation."

The three Gryffindors sat under a tree and watched some of the younger students play with the giant squid in the lake. Ron stretched out and laid his head on Hermione's lap. She was sitting with her back leaning against the tree. Neville laid on his side and propped his head up on his elbow. He grinned, "I'm so glad that we're done with exams."

Ron laughed, "Yeah, I love not working when someone else is. All those poor fifth years taking their O.W.L.'s. It's just horrible." Ron pretended to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye.

Neville laughed at his antics while Hermione snorted, "I'm sure that Ginny and Luna would love to hear about your sincerity."

Ron looked up at Hermione in mock indignation, "Hey, I feel bad for the two of them. It's the rest of them that I'm laughing at."

Neville snorted, "So, you're saying that you're not laughing at your sister?"

Ron shook his head emphatically, "I wouldn't dare. She's terrible to deal with when she thinks you've been making fun of her. If that's not bad enough, her boyfriend is probably the most talented and powerful wizard that has ever been seen at Hogwarts."

Hermione slapped Ron on the top of the head, "Hey, what about me?"

Ron rubbed his head, "What do you mean what about you? I said most powerful wizard. In case you haven't looked in a mirror lately, Hermione, you're a witch."

Hermione grinned and looked slightly sheepish as she said, "Oh. I didn't think about it like that."

Ron grinned slyly, "Although, I do have my doubts about you being able to take Harry. I think that he could beat you."

Hermione bit her lip, because she knew that Ron was right even though he was just teasing her. None of them could begin to compete with Harry's power. They sat around and talked for about another hour before the next exam period was over. The rest of the school came streaming out onto the lawns. Even the N.E.W.T.'s were over now.

Ginny walked up to the three of them and asked, "So, where's Harry?"

Ron shrugged, "I dunno. He said that he had something to take care of and that he would catch up with us later."

Ginny looked puzzled for a moment, "Did he say what he had to take care of?"

Hermione shook her head, "No, he just said that it was a surprise."

Ginny grinned, "Well, if it's a surprise from Harry, I'm sure that it will be interesting."

Ron snorted, "That's an understatement."

Neville sat bolt upright a moment later, "Here comes Luna."

Ron snickered, "I'd say that she's got you trained."

Hermione smacked Ron in the head, "Are you saying that you aren't trained?"

Ron hesitated, "Uhh.." He broke off as the group heard a scream coming from the front lawn. They all looked over to see giants lumbering into the Hogwart's grounds.

Hermione and Ginny's eyes locked, "Voldemort." they both said at once. Neville immediately jumped up and ran towards Luna. A split second later, Voldemort appeared in front of the group with four Death Eaters surrounding him. Hermione noticed immediately that the five of them were holding a talisman. The first thing that went through her mind was Portkey.

The Death Eaters split into two pairs and each pair grabbed one of the girls and took their wands from them before they could react. Ron drew his wand and leveled it at Voldemort. "Let them go."

Voldemort laughed, "Why should I do that, boy?"

Ron gulped, "If you don't I'll kill you."

Voldemort laughed even harder at this, "You must be a Gryffindor. Such silly courage. You will have to die, I think. I have who I want. Avada Kedavra." A jet of green light shot out of the end of Voldemort's wand. It hit Ron in the chest and he fell to the ground.

Both girls screamed in distress as one watched her boyfriend fall, and the other watched her brother. They both sagged in the arms of the Death Eaters holding them, but the Death Eaters merely drug them along.

A clear voice rang out, "Voldemort." The students that had been fleeing back to the castle stopped to see what was going to happen. Dumbledore stood just outside the castle radiating power with the Hogwart's professors at his back. All of them had their wands drawn and looks of grim determination on their faces.

Voldemort chuckled, "I see that you have come out to play, Dumbledore." Voldemort walked forward slowly, while the Death Eaters behind him drug Hermione and Ginny along. The group of giants that appeared to number about seventy-five had lined up in a semicircle around the front of the castle and had been joined by about fifty Death Eaters. All in all it was an impressive force to behold.

Dubmledore spoke firmly, "Leave the students out of this, Tom. This is a battle between you and me."

Voldemort shook his head, "Oh, we can't have that. As you see I have acquired two of our young Potter's friends. They are much too valuable to give up. However, I am in a generous mood. I will duel with you one on one. Potter's girlfriend can be the prize. Once I have defeated you, I will kill her."

Dumbledore paled, "It seems that I have no choice in the matter. However, I want you to know this, Tom. Even if you kill me today, you will still not win the war. Harry is out there, and he is the one you cannot defeat. I may die, but I will die knowing that you will fall at the hands of Harry Potter. He will destroy you."

Voldemort screamed in rage, "I will be the one to destroy Potter, Dumbledore. That's why you sent him away. He isn't ready to face me. He's afraid."

Dumbledore smiled knowingly, "You're the one that is afraid, Tom. You waited to attack until Harry had gone away. You were afraid to face him. You think that if you kill his friends and his family that you will be able to break him. You are wrong. Anyone who dies here today will be avenged in blood. Harry will take no prisoners. You and all your minions will die at the hands of the power Harry carries."

Voldemort cackled cruelly, "Bold words, Dumbledore. I would like to know something before we duel. How does it feel to know that Potter's best friend Weasley is already dead?" Voldemort pointed back towards the lake where Ron's crumpled body was clearly visible.

Dumbledore saw this and his heart broke. "I'm sorry, Harry." he mumbled under his breath. Out loud to Voldemort, he spoke, "Mr. Weasley was a symbol of the courage that it takes to be a Gryffindor. He may be one more in your list of murders, Voldemort, but he will stand as one of the last. Your time on this planet is over."

During this exchange of words, Hermione mumbled brokenly over and over again, "I wish Harry were here. I wish Harry were here."

Ginny merely cried softly. Then, what Hermione was saying registered in her brain. She had a way to contact Harry. The magical mirror was in her robes. She just had to find a way to touch it. She took a quick step to her right and wrenched her left arm loose from the Death Eater holding it. She quickly darted her hand inside her robes to touch the wand and screamed, "Harry." The Death Eater that she had pulled away from backhanded her across the face, splitting her lip. Then, he grabbed her and held her arm again.

Voldemort looked around in irritation, "What was that all about?"

One of the Death Eaters bowed, “She appeared to be calling for Potter, My Lord.”

Dumbledore grinned when he heard this. They might have a chance after all. Dumbledore knew about Harry giving Ginny the two-way mirror. Dumbledore also knew that Harry carried the other one with him at all times. It would only be a matter of time before Harry would return to the school. All he had to do was buy some time for everyone else until Harry returned. “Tom, it is time. You have stalled for too long.”

Dumbledore sent a curse sailing at Voldemort, who easily erected a Shield Charm to block it and the duel began. Both of the wizards were extremely capable. They both summoned monsters from the earth to do battle. Dumbledore animated the gargoyle statues that were on the exterior of the castle to attack Voldemort. He handled all of this easily.

While this duel was getting ready to begin, Harry was standing in Honeydukes trying to decide what sweets to buy for the party that evening. The mirror grew warm inside his robe and he heard Ginny’s voice screaming, “Harry.”

Harry immediately pulled out his mirror and when Ginny’s face didn’t appear, he grew worried. “Oh, no, something has happened.” Harry pointed at the shopkeepers. “Floo the Ministry. Ask to speak to Dawlish, Kingsley Shacklebolt, or Arthur Weasley. Tell them Voldemort is attacking Hogwarts. I’ve gone to face him. Hurry.” Harry transformed into a phoenix right in front of the stunned shopkeepers who hurried to do his bidding.

Harry winged his way back up to the castle, and surveyed the battle below. It was obvious that Dumbledore was tiring and that Voldemort would eventually wear him down and kill him. Harry had to find Ginny and remove her from harm before he could intervene, though. As he was thinking this he saw Dumbledore hit the ground.

The battle below was going quite badly for Dumbledore. His golems and statues had been defeated, and his shields were getting increasingly weaker.

Voldemort laughed, “I feel your power dropping, Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed, “I’m not finished yet, Tom. While I live you will not take this school.”

“True. I will not take it while you live. Once I kill you, though, I will walk over your corpse to claim what is mine.” sneered Voldemort.

Dumbledore shook his head as he deflected another curse that was thrown at him. “No, Tom, even then you will not take the school. Should I fall, another will take my place. Then, there will be another one after them. That process will continue until you have no choice but to face the Child of the Prophecy. The child that frightens you to death. Harry Potter.”

Voldemort screeched in rage, “I will kill Harry Potter.” Voldemort cast the Cruciatus Curse at Dumbledore, “Crucio!” This curse finally shattered the last of Dumbledore’s defenses and he fell to the ground writhing in agony.

While this was occurring, Harry spotted Ginny and Hermione being held by the Death Eaters. He made himself invisible and then landed and transformed into his human form to deal with them.

All the time that the fight between Dumbledore and Voldemort had been occurring, Hermione had been zoned out. She kept repeating over and over, “I wish Harry were here. I wish Harry were here.” However, in her mind, there was much more turmoil. She just couldn’t believe Ron was dead. It just couldn’t be true. She played the events of the last six years through her mind. Their first Halloween when Ron had made fun of her after Charms class. How later that same night Ron had used the very spell that they had learned that day to save her life. How she felt when she saw him being hit by the queen in that awful chess game when they were going after the Sorcerer’s Stone. How glad she was to see him again after being petrified in their second year. How worried she was when she saw Sirius drag him into the passage underneath the Whomping Willow tree in third year. How mad she was at him when he didn’t ask her to the Yule Ball in fourth year and then made fun of her for going with Viktor. How much that she had finally come to realize that she loved him. It was all so unfair.

Ginny’s thoughts were similar to Hermione’s. Ron was dead. Her closest sibling was lying lifeless beneath a tree beside the lake at Hogwarts. She reflected on all the years that they had spent together at the Burrow before Ron had finally went off to Hogwarts and she got to join him a year later. The teasing that she received from him for the crush that she had on Harry. The complaining that he was always doing. She would never hear any of that ever again. What was worse, anyone of them might follow him soon. All of them might die. What if she had to live on without any of her friends or family? What if Harry had to live on without any of them? Would he be able to bear the knowledge that he couldn’t save them?

The Death Eaters standing around hooted in triumph when they saw Dumbledore fall. It would be a great victory for the Dark Lord. The giants pounded their clubs into the ground to signify their pleasure.

Dumbledore writhed on the ground in pain until Voldemort removed the curse and laughed maniacally. “This is a glorious day. I have defeated my greatest enemy at last. Dumbledore is fallen, and the rest of you will follow his passing. I’m going to kill you in a moment, Dumbledore. Before I do, though, I want you to see that I have killed Potter’s girlfriend. I want you to die knowing that I have taken the one thing that is most important to the boy and eliminated it.”

While Voldemort was doing his gloating to the staff, who appeared to be standing ready to attack, Harry was positioning himself to attack. He waited until Voldemort motioned his two Death Eaters to bring Ginny forward and then he attacked. Four well placed Banishing Charms sent the four Death Eaters sailing past Voldemort’s head. Two more sent Ginny and Hermione to land neatly right beside Professor McGonagall.

As Voldemort was motioning his Death Eaters to bring the girl to him, he spoke the final words of his boast, “I guess your precious Mr. Potter is not going to save the day.”

As he said these words, his Death Eaters suddenly whizzed past him and landed in a tangled heap on the ground. He spun to see what the disturbance was just as Harry made himself visible.

29. Confrontation with Tom

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Tom. As long as there is breath in my body, I will defy you.” shouted Harry loud enough for everyone to hear.

Voldemort laughed confidently, “You may defy me, Potter, but you will die because of it. I am the greater.”

“We’ll see, Tom. I have already notified the Ministry that you’re here. The Aurors will be here soon. Then, we’ll see how brave your pathetic followers are.” Harry said.

Voldemort’s face darkened, “The Aurors are of no concern to me. I could destroy them all without aid from my loyal Death Eaters.”

Harry shrugged, “Under normal circumstances, that might be true. However, I am here now. It will take every ounce of magical energy you can scrape up to keep me from killing you, Tom. Your reign of terror will be ended at my hands.”

“As I said to Dumbledore, bold words, Potter. I will enjoy forcing you to eat them.” said Voldemort coldly.

Several contingents of Aurors came popping into view as their Portkeys brought them to the grounds. Dawlish hurried over to McGonagall, “What’s going on?”

McGonagall shrugged, “I wish I knew. You-Know-Who has beaten Dumbledore and Harry is mocking him.”

Dawlish gripped his wand, “We should attack.”

Snape grabbed his arm, “No, you fool. You’ll get the students killed. We have to trust that Potter can handle this and leave it in his hands.”

McGonagall glanced at Snape sharply, “If we get out of this alive, Severus, I fully intend to tell Harry that you said that.”

Snape almost smiled, “Minerva, if Potter gets us out of this alive, I will tell him myself.”

Harry yelled out for everyone to hear, “You’re outnumbered, Tom. You can’t win. So, I propose a deal. A duel. You and me. Winner take all.”

Voldemort smiled, “Interesting. Let us begin.”

Harry shook his head, “Tom, you know as well as I do that our wands are brothers. We can not duel with magic.”

“Then, what do you suggest, Potter?” asked Voldemort haughtily.

Harry smiled, “Swords.”

Voldemort stared at Harry in disbelief, “You expect to face me in a swordfight, Potter. This is ridiculous. I am a master swordsman.”

Harry pointed his wand towards the castle, “Accio Sword of Gryffindor.” A moment later the sword sailed out of an open window and dropped down into Harry’s outstretched hand. He pocketed his wand as it came down to him. When he caught it, he swung it in his customary figure X in front of him and stepped back into a dueling stance, “So am I.”

All of the Death Eaters began to mutter among themselves. Voldemort spun around and gave them a malevolent look. “Silence!” he screamed. He spun back to face Harry.

Harry motioned with his hand. “Do you expect me to wait forever? Conjure a sword and let’s get on with this.”

Voldemort conjured a sword, and then pocketed his own wand. The two wizards faced off, and then the fight began in earnest. The two battled back and forth. It was obvious to everyone present that both of them were without equal when it came to swordplay. It was almost as if they could anticipate the other’s movements and thoughts. The sword blades were moving so fast that all anyone could see of them was a blur.

The two of them stopped for a moment after about half an hour of constant battle. They were both breathing heavy, but Harry was smiling whereas Voldemort was not. “What’s the matter, Tom? Did you not expect to find your better, this day? You should have. I have been telling you that I was going to destroy you for some time now.”

Voldemort’s mouth drew very thin. The snakelike eyes dilated with fury, and Voldemort said through clenched teeth, “The fight isn’t over yet, Potter.”

Harry nodded as he lunged forward to renew the attack, “It will be soon enough, Tom.”

The two wizards fought for a while longer until it began to become apparent that Voldemort must lose this duel. Both of them had managed to inflict minor cuts on the other, but Harry seemed to be scoring these minor blows more and more often as the fight continued. It was evident that Voldemort would fall under the strain of wounds.

Harry finally saw his chance and reversed Voldemort’s blade into a large circle while bringing his leg up to kick the sword from Voldemort’s grasp. Unfortunately for Harry, Voldemort anticipated this move and had snaked his off hand into his robes and retrieved his wand. While Harry recovered from the kick, Voldemort finished the spin and cried out, “Avada Kedavra.” Harry was forced to throw himself sideways to avoid the curse. As Harry rolled on the ground back to his feet, and went for his own wand, Voldemort followed the Killing Curse with an Explosion Hex. “Explodra!” Harry was hit with the hex full force. It sent him wind milling into the air, and he landed a second later. He was bruised, and bleeding. Harry still attempted to regain his footing. Voldemort stood over him and smiled, “You have no idea how much I am going to enjoy this, Potter. Avada Kedavra!” The jet of green light hit Harry right in the top of the head and sent his body flopping backwards onto his back to lay lifeless.

The entire population of the grounds stood staring in shock. Ginny screamed and tore herself away from the professors to run and fling herself down on Harry’s body. She listened desperately for a heartbeat, but there was nothing there. She sobbed uncontrollably over the lifeless corpse of what had once been The Boy-Who-Lived.

Voldemort stepped on Harry’s fallen wand, snapping it in two. “I have won.” He walked over to Dumbledore and kicked him in the ribs. Dumbledore grunted in pain, but refused to speak. “Your precious Child of the Prophecy is dead, Dumbledore. You will follow him shortly and I will be the undisputed master of the world. There is no other that can match my powers.”

Suddenly a booming laugh echoed throughout the grounds. Everyone looked around for the source of the laugh, but no one could be seen. Then, an echoing and otherworldly voice rang out, “Tom, you are a fool. You have no conception of what true power is. You think that the ability to take a life is power. You are wrong. The ability to give life is far greater still.”

Voldemort spun around wildly, “Who’s speaking?”

Ginny was looking down at Harry’s corpse with an odd dreamy expression on her face, “That’s Harry.”

Voldemort looked at the body that hadn’t so much as twitched. “Potter is dead.”

“Are you sure, Tom?” rang out the voice again. “Can you truly be sure that I am gone?”

“Yes!!” screamed Voldemort in fury. “I killed you. You are nothing more than a ghost.”

The laughter peeled around him, “As I said before, you are a fool, Tom. You have spent a great deal of time and energy to discover the contents of the Prophecy. Would you like to hear them now?”

"Fine. If it will make your spirit shut up any faster so that I can finish exterminating these Mudbloods and Mudblood loving fools, then go ahead." answered Voldemort peevishly.

THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT ... AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

"That is the Prophecy, Tom."

Voldemort crowed in triumph, "Yes, and I have fulfilled it. One of us must die at the hand of the other."

The voice laughed again, "You fulfilled the Prophecy, but not in that way. You are forgetting the power that the Dark Lord knows not. Neither of us can die until that power is revealed."

"I saw no power. You were weak and that is why I defeated you." shouted Voldemort, but there was an underlying tension present in his words.

"I will say it again, Tom. You are a fool. The power that resides within my essence has been locked away. I have been unable to touch it, unable to channel the power that I could sense. You, however, unlocked it." thundered the magnified voice of Harry Potter.

Voldemort began to shake in fear, "What are you talking about, Potter?"

Harry laughed. The sound reverberated all around the castle. "You unlocked my power in the same way that you sealed it. That fated Halloween night, you cast the Killing Curse at me. It locked my power and made me weak, while I should have been strong. The only way to release the power was to use the same key. You cast the Killing Curse on me again, and now my power is free."

Voldemort yelled in defiance, "You're bluffing, Potter. You have no power."

Wind began to stir around the giants and Death Eaters. "I will show you the power, Tom. Very soon, I will return to my body, and then I will destroy you and all your minions. My suggestion is that you run. Run and hide, for I will enjoy the hunt."

This was too much for the Death Eaters and the giants, who all fled in terror.

Voldemort raised his wand, "I may not be able to kill you, today, Potter, but I will find a way. Before I take my leave, I will finish what I came here to accomplish. I will kill your girlfriend. Avada Kedavra!" The jet of green light headed straight for Ginny. She looked up to stare at Voldemort in defiance as she died, but the curse never hit her. It stopped in mid-air just in front of her and then dissipated.

"Do you really think that it could be that easy. As I said, Tom, run and hide."

This was finally too much for Voldemort. He tapped the talisman that he wore around his neck and disappeared from the grounds. As soon as he was gone, Harry got up off the ground and smiled down at Ginny. "I love you."

Ginny turned to him and exclaimed, "You're really alive."

Harry nodded, "Of course. Did you really expect me to roll over and die?"

"You weren't breathing." Ginny said as she hugged Harry and burst into tears again. Harry consoled her as he looked over to where Madam Pomfrey was tending to Dumbledore.

"Ginny, I need to go help Dumbledore. Stay here for a minute." Harry walked over to Dumbledore, and smiled down at the aged wizard as he knelt beside him.

Dumbledore smiled back weakly, "I'm so proud, Harry. You did it. I would like for you to help Minerva as much as you can, Harry."

Harry made a wry face, "What does she need my help with?"

"Running the school of course. She will become Headmistress with my passing." answered Dumbledore.

Harry snorted, "I don't know what you're talking about. You're not going anywhere. I'm not ready to take over the administration of a school. I've still got a lot of Dark wizard hunting to do next year. After that you can retire, but not before."

"Harry, I'm dying."

Harry snorted, "Whatever."

Madam Pomfrey cleared her throat, "I'm afraid that he's right, Mr. Potter. There is nothing that I can do for him."

Harry shrugged, "Oh, then I guess I could give it a go." He waved his hands over Dumbledore and a blue light jumped from Harry's hands to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sat up and shook his head, "That was invigorating. I believe that you have much to explain, Harry."

Harry nodded, "Yes, I know. I'm going to have even more to explain after my next trick."

The surrounding professors looked at Harry curiously as he got up and walked back to Ginny. She had disobeyed his order to stay put and had went over to Ron's body with Hermione. Both girls sat beside him holding his hands and crying. Harry stood above him and cried out some words in an ancient dialect. Then, he disappeared. A few moments later he reappeared.

Hermione looked at him, "Where did you go?"

Harry grinned, "Back in time." He leaned over and snapped his fingers right in front of Ron's nose, and Ron shot up from the ground as if he had a rocket attached to him.

He stretched, "What happened?"

Everyone surrounding the area stared at Ron in shock. Everyone knew that he had been dead moments before. Hermione grabbed Ron in a hug and refused to let go. She just kept repeating, "I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead."

Ron patted Hermione on the back soothingly, "I'm alright, Hermione."

Ginny turned to Harry and asked, "How did you do it?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat behind them, "I would like to know that myself, Harry. I know of no spell that can return the dead to life."

Harry shook his head, "There isn't. I think that we need to go inside to discuss this."

Dawlish interrupted, "What about You-Know-Who?"

"Call him by his name. Tom Riddle. As scared as Tom is right now, I don't think that we have anything to worry about from him for awhile." answered Harry.

The group walked upstairs to Dumbledore's office. Once they finally sat down to await an explanation, the group included Snape, McGonagall, Kingsley, Tonks, Arthur, Dumbledore, Neville, Luna, Dawlish, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Harry smiled at the group, "Well, what do you want to know?"

Hermione looked at him as if he were crazy, "How did you bring Ron back to life?"

Harry shook his head, "I didn't. He was never dead."

Hermione got irate, "What are you talking about? I saw him get hit with the Killing Curse. He wasn't breathing. He didn't have a heartbeat. That usually means that you're dead."

"It was an illusion." replied Harry.

Ginny asked, "What do you mean an illusion?"

"Well, when the Death Eaters attacked and Ron was supposedly hit with the Killing Curse, I was there." answered Harry.

Dumbledore smiled, "So, that's what you meant by saying that you went back in time."

Harry nodded, "I went back and made myself invisible. Then, I blocked the curse before it actually hit Ron. Then, I cast a masking spell on him that would make it appear to anyone that he was dead. I knocked him out at the same time."

Hermione looked furious, "So, you let us believe that he was dead the whole time."

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but that was the only way that I could think of to save him without interfering with the sequence of time. I couldn't do any damage. The effects could have been catastrophic."

Her expression changed, "I guess its okay. Ron's alive and that is all that really matters."

Harry leaned back, "Alright. Is there anything else that you want to know?"

Tonks blurted out, "How strong are you, Harry?"

Harry grinned, "I figured someone would ask me that. My power is amazing."

"How so?" asked Hermione. "We saw you do magic without a wand, since Voldemort broke yours."

Ron grinned, "I bet you could take You-Know-Who out with ease now."

Harry shook his head, "I'm afraid not."

Everyone looked at him in amazement. McGonagall spoke up, "Surely, You-Know-Who isn't that powerful."

"I assure you that he is, Professor. My power has only increased in certain respects. Offensive magic and effect magic are powers that I am already powerful in, but I have not grown anymore powerful than I was before. The only difference is that now I can channel the power without a wand. Defensive and healing magic, however are a different story. I can heal basically any wound. I can also travel through time. I have to be careful with that one, though. It could have some nasty side effects."

Dumbledore asked, "What about your defensive powers, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, "Well, I can block any curse with my shielding spells, but for the most part, I don't have to."

Snape asked, "What do you mean, you don't have to?"

"Ordinary curses and hexes have no effect on me as long as I'm in control." answered Harry.

Ginny looked at him in bewilderment, "In control?"

Harry nodded, "If I was to be wounded, then I would lose my focus and concentration. Then, normal curses would be able to affect me."

Hermione, ever the student, asked, "Can you demonstrate?"

Harry nodded, and stood up, "Someone try to stun me."

"Stupefy." Three distinct stunners shot out from the wands of Ron, Ginny, and Hermione.

Harry stood and waited for the red jets of light to hit him. They contacted and Harry yawned. "See what I mean."

The rest of the people nodded. Dumbledore leaned forward, "Harry, how powerful of a spell can you resist?"

Harry grinned, "There are only three spells in existence that can harm me as long as I am prepared for them."

Ron breathed, "The Unforgivables."

Harry snorted, "I don't think so. The spells I'm talking about have been lost since the battles between Merlin and Morgana. Unfortunately for me, if Voldemort discovers them, then I could be killed. If not, then I am more or less impossible to kill."

Hermione looked skeptical, "Are you saying that you can not be harmed by the Cruciatus Curse?"

Harry raised his arms, and said, "Go for it."

Hermione gasped, "I couldn't. I don't want to hurt you."

"You aren't strong enough to cast a spell that could harm me, Hermione." Harry turned to Dumbledore, "How about you, sir?"

Dumbledore replied mildly, "This is an experiment that I would prefer not to participate in, Harry."

Harry shrugged, "Suit yourself. I guess you're up, Professor Snape."

Snape started as Harry called out his name. "What do you mean, Potter?" he asked.

Harry grinned, "Your dream come true. Cast the Cruciatus Curse on me. I'm giving you permission."

Snape shook his head, "I won't."

Harry shook his head in disbelief, "All of you are pathetic. Come on, somebody throw the curse."

Snape grudgingly raised his wand and yelled, "Crucio!" The spell hit Harry, who gazed back at Snape as if nothing in the world was wrong. Snape released the spell, "Impossible. No one could stand that kind of pain without crying out."

"What pain? I didn't feel a thing. Three of you at the same time. Come on."

Snape, Dumbledore, and Kingsley all yelled, "Crucio!"

Harry jumped, "I think I feel something. Oh wait, that's just an itch." He scratched his nose as if nothing was wrong.

Ron snickered, "That was bloody brilliant." The rest of the room merely sat and stared at the Boy-Who-Lived.

30. Aftermath

Several days later, after the N.E.W.T. examination grades were given out, it was time for the end of term feast. Harry sat down with his friends at the Gryffindor table. Luna returned to the Ravenclaw table for the feast, but constantly winked at Neville. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione smiled at him continuously, while Ron looked on in confusion.

Dumbledore stood up, “The time has come to end another year. It is time to award the House Cup, and the points stand thus, In fourth place with 322 points, Hufflepuff, In third place with 381 points, Slytherin, In second place with 452 points, Ravenclaw. The House Cup is awarded to Gryffindor in first place with 586 points. Well done, Gryffindor. Now it is time for me to make a few announcements.”

McGonagall gave Severus a penetrating glance to which he nodded in reply, and then stood up. “Headmaster, if I may interrupt, I have something to say.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in surprise at being interrupted. The only time that this had ever occurred before was when Umbridge had been at the school. This should be interesting thought Dumbledore. “Of course, Professor Snape. You have the floor.” Dumbledore sat down, and waited with interest to see what was about to occur.

During this exchange Harry leaned over to Ginny and asked quietly, “What do you think that he’s up to?”

Ginny merely shrugged in reply.

Snape picked up his glass, “Over the past six years here, there have been a group of students that have risked everything, including expulsion and my wrath to do what they thought needed to be done. They have been honored above all other students time and time again. One of these students surpasses even the others. He has proven that he can be trusted to always do the right thing, and prevail against the forces of evil. I would like to propose a toast to this individual. So I ask you to join me and raise your glasses to Harry Potter.”

The entire hall froze in shock. Even Dumbledore appeared to be speechless. Harry sat with his mouth hanging open with the rest of the Gryffindors. This was just too much to believe. The rest of the hall recovered and grabbed their glasses, raised them and shouted, “Harry Potter!”

Snape returned to his seat with a smug grin on his face as the rest of the staff continued to stare at him in awe and shock.

Dumbledore finally regained his senses and stood, “Now, onto the announcements. It has been a wonderful year. However, there was an incident of great danger that occurred a few days ago. All of you know that I speak of the attack by Lord Voldemort. We won the battle, but the war is far from over. So I must ask you all to stay alert over the coming summer months. Voldemort will attempt to subvert and destroy as many of the allies of the light as he possible can. Take no unnecessary chances. Hopefully, by the end of next year, this will all be over. For now, enjoy the feast, and the holidays.” Dumbledore sat down amidst a great deal of applause, and then the feast appeared.

Everyone dove directly into the sumptuous meal and began to eat.

The next day, they rode the carriages down to the platform to get on the train. Harry stood with his friends talking to Hagrid. Hagrid asked, “Are ye goin to enjoy ye’re holiday, Arry?”

Harry smiled, “I’m going to try. I assume that I will have to mix business with pleasure, though. I don’t see much of a way around it.”

Hagrid looked puzzled, “How so?”

“I have no intention of giving Tom and his Death Eaters free reign this summer. I told Tom that I would enjoy the hunt, and I intend to.” answered Harry.

Hermione gasped, “Harry, you can’t be serious. You can’t go out looking for them. That would be dangerous. Somebody could get hurt.”

Harry nodded, “You’re right, Hermione. It will be extremely dangerous. For them.”

Hermione started to say something again, but Ron clamped a hand over her mouth. “Hermione, for once, shut up and let him do as he pleases without a headache.”

Hermione looked furious as being cut off, but the rest of them laughed at her. Neville placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder, “I don’t know how the rest of them feel about it, Harry, but if you need me, you know where to find me. Death Eater hunting sounds right up my alley.”

Ron grinned, “You sure have changed, Neville. A few years ago, you would have been terrified at the idea of facing a Death Eater.”

Neville snorted, “Like you wouldn’t have. I’ve already experienced the Cruciatus Curse. The only thing that they could do worse, would be to kill me.”

Luna placed a hand on his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder, “That’s quite a risk, Neville.”

Neville nodded and smiled, “I know, but I can’t think of anyone I would rather be beside to take that risk than my friends.”

Harry wrapped and arm around Neville and Luna, “Hopefully, that is a bridge that we will never have to cross. If we do, then we’ll deal with it when we get there. Right now, though, all I want to do is enjoy the ride back to King’s Cross.”

Ginny smiled, “Well, we better hurry, then, because the train is about to leave.” The six friends said goodbye to Hagrid, who waved merrily to them all as they got on the train to return home for the summer.

The six students found an empty compartment, and settled down for the ride. Ginny leaned over into Harry’s shoulder and stretched out, and tried to take a nap. Neville and Ron got into a game of wizards chess while Luna and Harry watched. Hermione, as usual, curled up with a book and began to read.

After a couple of hours and several shifts as Harry and Neville alternated being beaten by Ron, Draco Malfoy showed up. He pulled the door to the compartment open, and said haughtily, “I see you’ve had some additions made to your fan club, Potter.”

Harry looked up from his game to see Malfoy flanked by his two customary cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, “Sod off, Malfoy. The odor is too much to bear.”

Ginny smiled, “Yes, I believe that we need to open a window to get rid of the smell.” She leaned over and opened one of the windows.

Malfoy’s eyes glinted dangerously, “I’m warning you, Potter. You better keep your dog on a leash.”

Harry stood and advanced on Malfoy, “You aren’t too smart are you, Malfoy? Even your master is scared to death of me, and you don’t have enough sense to back down. I know that you carry the Dark Mark. The moment that you give me an excuse, Malfoy, I am going to kill you. Keep that in mind if you decide to gallivant with your father and his toads.” Harry took a step back, and settled back down to the board. He looked over to see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle still standing in the doorway. “In case, the three of you are too dumb to comprehend what I just said, I was dismissing you. Now, leave.”

Malfoy turned red with anger and went for his wand. Harry casually waved his hand and sent all three of them crashing into the far wall. He spoke evenly and coldly, “That was your last warning, Malfoy. Stay out of my way.” Harry waved his hand again, and the door shut and locked itself.

Hermione looked at Harry in concern, “Harry, I don’t think that threatening Malfoy is going to do any good. He’s just going to keep bothering you.”

Harry looked up, “That was no threat, Hermione. If he continues to associate with the Death Eaters, then I will kill him. No questions asked.”

Ron looked askance, “Could you really kill him?”

“Do you really need to ask me that question, Ron? I’ve already killed quite a few Death Eaters. I have given Malfoy more chances than he deserves to change. He will have it his own way, and I will destroy him for it. There is no other way. If I allow him to continue on the path that he has chosen, he will become the next dark lord. Remember, Tom Riddle had just finished school, when Albus defeated Grindelwald. Draco is the right age to follow in Tom’s footsteps. He certainly idolizes him enough.” answered Harry.

The rest of the people in their room nodded their heads soberly. Ginny grinned, “Okay, that’s enough dark thoughts for the time being. We are supposed to be enjoying ourselves. Let’s play Exploding Snap.”

Harry smiled back at her, “Excellent idea, my dear.”

The six students continued to play games as the train finished its voyage back to London. The students got their trolleys and wheeled through the barrier into King’s Cross station together. Once, Harry entered the Muggle world, he saw something that he couldn’t believe. The Dursleys were standing there waiting for him. He grinned and then began to laugh. Ginny looked at him in concern, “Harry, what’s wrong with you?”

Harry pointed at the Dursleys, “I guess with all that has been going on, no one told them that I would not be returning. This is going to be fun.”

Vernon barked at Harry, “Well, boy, let’s go.”

Harry shook his head, “I don’t think so, Vernon. I am not returning to Privet Drive.”

Petunia looked up sharply, “What was that?”

Harry smiled, “I have my own home, now. I will never darken your doorstep, again.”

Vernon advanced threateningly on Harry, “Why did you make us come all the way here to pick you up if you weren’t returning?”

Harry shrugged, “An oversight, actually. Nobody thought to inform you that I would not be returning. I assumed that Professor Dumbledore would have told you, and I assume that he made the same presumption about me.”

Vernon growled, “Fine, then. I don’t want to ever see you near our house, again, boy.” Vernon shook his finger in Harry’s face.

Harry snorted, “Don’t call me boy, Vernon. The consequences could be most severe if I am displeased.”

Vernon barked, “Don’t give me any of that rubbish. I know that you can’t use any of your tricks on me outside of school.”

Harry sighed, “How wrong you are, Vernon. However, I warned you, and now you must suffer for it.” Harry waved his hand, and suddenly all three Dursley’s were clothed in clown suits, complete with makeup and ridiculously large shoes.

Petunia gasped in horror. Dudley began to cry, and Vernon shot one look of menace at Harry. The three Dursley beat a hasty retreat after this, since people were starting to stare at them.

Harry turned around to find Ginny, Ron, Neville, Luna, Fred, and George beaming at him. Arthur attempting to hide the smile on his face from his wife, while Hermione and Molly looked on disapprovingly. Molly began, “Harry, that wasn’t very nice.”

Harry smirked, “No, but it was extremely funny.”

Hermione broke in, “Harry, your powers aren’t meant to be used that way.”

Harry snorted, “What’s the use of being the most powerful wizard alive, if I can’t have a little fun.”

Fred and George broke in, “Yeah, Hermione, lighten up. You know how bad the Muggles have treated him over the years. He deserved a chance to get back at them. Besides, mate, that was bloody brilliant.”

Molly softened when they made the statement about how the Dursleys had treated Harry over the years. Hermione still looked doubtful, but refrained from saying anything else, since it was obvious that her opinion was in the minority.

Harry grinned at everyone, “Let’s go home.”